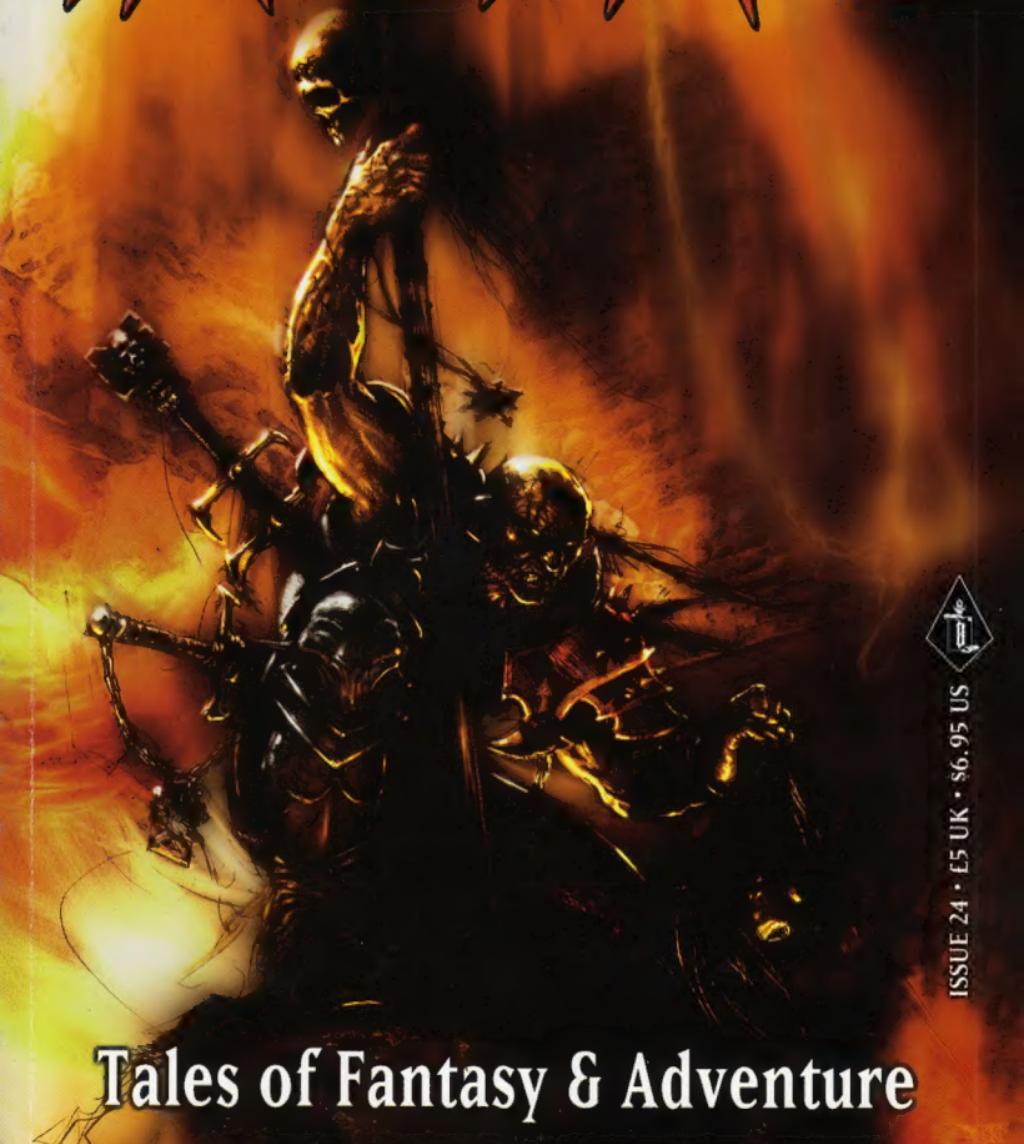


INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

As you may know, one of our aims here in the Black Library is to encourage new writing talent. To that end, we've always made it plain that the pages of Inferno! are open to anyone who wants to submit a story. We've mentioned this before, and it's gratifying to get so many great proposals from potential writers every single day.

For anyone who wants to submit a story, we have a set of simple guidelines, that you can get on our website or by writing to us. In essence, though, our guides boil down to two simple rules. One: be true to the Warhammer or Warhammer 40,000 background. Two: be any good. Fulfil those two and odds are you'll be published in these pages at some stage!

In our writers' guides we go into far more detail than that. And there is one particular clause in them that has people writing in with howls of protest time after time. It is this one: '*Things to avoid: any plot which features an ork (or orc) or eldar as a central hero; we will not take these.*'

But why? come the cries again and again. I've just

*completed a series of epic tales starring an eldar farseer!
How dare you tell me that I
can't submit them!*

The reasons for this are quite simple. The eldar, we are told, are a deeply alien race. Their culture is full of bizarre, inhuman concepts – they build spacecraft by singing at raw materials to grow them, for pity's sake! So while a story might make sense if written as if a human observer was witnessing an eldar, a tale written from an eldar perspective would make little sense. Eldar are not human, and as a result we are never going to print a story where it is plainly just about humans with a few words changed so it's allegedly about eldar.

Orcs (and orks) are even harder to deal with. We know orcs are funny, yet they are also savage and bestial, and inspire great fear in their enemies. Strangely enough, though, all we ever get are daft non-stories written in a mock-Cockney style, where plot, character and orky culture is forgotten. We have *Deff Skwadron* for that; we don't need any more.

So there you have it. As a rider on the above, we always tell prospective writers that if they believe that their own particular eldar or orc tale is a work of genius, and really does convey what it is like to be a member of such an alien culture, we will of course be delighted to consider it.

None of this is to say that the pages of Inferno! will be free of stories featuring eldar, orks, tyranids, tau, kroot or lacrymole. But they will be portrayed realistically, put in perspective by being described through human eyes – all the better to make their alienness seem truly strange indeed.

If you have a differing take, of course, you are always free to drop us a line at the various addresses below, or leave us a message on the community message boards at our website

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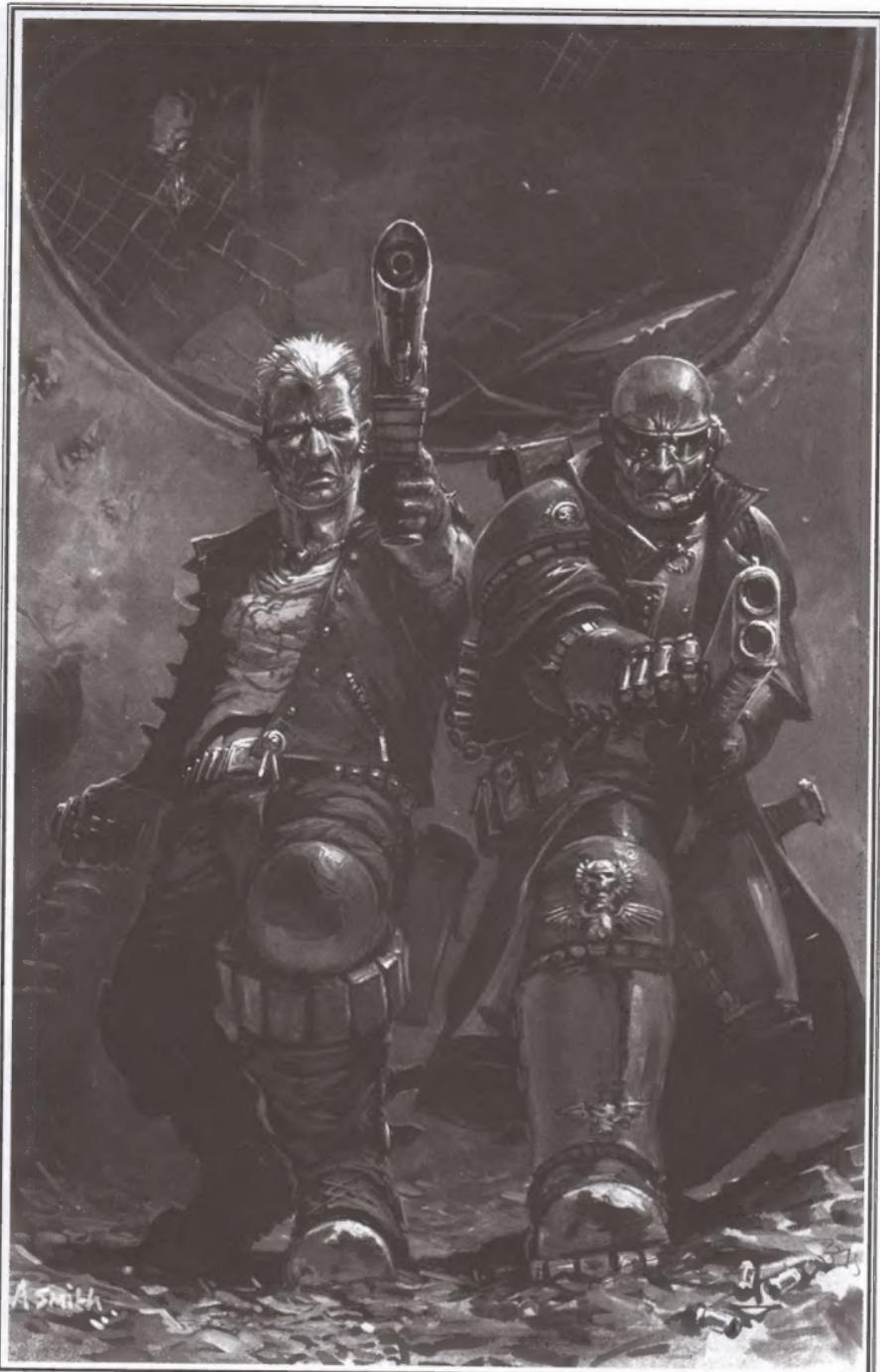
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BUSINESS AS USUAL

by Graham McNeill

RIIGHT AWAY, Snowdog could tell that these six, deadhead Jackboys were trying to pull one over on him. Sure, they talked the talk, walked the walk and apparently had some real heavy connections with the High Hive gangs, but his gut told him that this deal was going to hell. He couldn't put his finger on it, but something was definitely wrong. Maybe it was the location the Jackboys had chosen for the deal, too close to the Tyranid nests for Snowdog's liking. Or maybe it was their attitude. They were too cocky, acting like he was some dumb squarejohn who didn't know the score and Snowdog didn't like that. Not one bit. It meant they thought they were holding all the cards.

Like all Jackboys, they wore plain grey boiler suits, pulled in at the waist with a broad leather belt. Every one of them had shaven heads, tattooed with crosses, guns and gang symbols. They wore knee-length, shining jackboots and two carried Arbites combat shotguns, no doubt looted from a couple of dead Bronzes. They looked a bit too ready to use them and if this deal did go ballistic, then he'd have to put those two down first.

'Well?' said one of the Jackboys. 'It's good stuff, yeah? Your boy looks like he's pretty happy with it.'

Snowdog had to agree, the Kalma was top notch. Lex was smacked out of his damn eyeballs, sedated by the euphoric drug and grinning inanely, thick, ropes of drool dangling from his chin. If some shooting action went down here, Lex would be frag all use in the fight. Thank the Hive Spirit he'd decided to bring Silver and Tigerlily with him. The girls could take on any hard case and make him wish he'd never been born. He'd seen their handiwork many times and was eternally grateful they ran with his gang.

Both were clad in dark catsuits and pistol belts. Tigerlily kept her red hair cropped close to her skull in shaven stripes and wore a baldric of assorted throwing knives and daggers across her chest. Silver's albino-

white hair was tied in a long ponytail and she was armed with two gleaming auto pistols, holstered beneath a long, leather coat. The kind of firepower the Jackboys were packing was beginning to make him wish he'd brought Trask or Jonny Stomp along as well, but he'd wanted to make a point. He'd wanted the Jackboys to know he didn't need big guns to prove how much of a player he was.

'Yeah,' nodded Snowdog, conceding the point, 'it looks like good stuff, but Lex trips out on coffee and ain't payin' for it neither.'

'Hey, a free sample only goes so far, you know? You wanna deal or what?' said a second Jackboy, irritation in his voice. Snowdog's suspicions racked up a notch. They were too eager to deal. Jackboys usually felt the need to strut like damn peacocks before getting down to the dealing.

They sat in a junked out factory unit, on the northern edge of the Stank, one of the lowest and most dangerous Badzones in Erebus hive. Not even the Arbites Enforcers would come here without damn good reason. A hab unit had collapsed on the factory a couple of months back, killing all the workers and flattening most of the machinery. It had been abandoned and left to rot, another stinking, sedimentary layer of metal and flesh. There were still tunnels and chambers left in the unit, areas that had escaped the violence of the hab's collapse. The area they now sat in was low ceilinged and strewn with broken glass and twisted metal girders. The flattened hulk of a milling machine served as their business table. A large, sealed petri dish sat on the machine, filled with tiny red capsules. Six hundred Kalma drops, worth a small fortune - enough to get some real heavy ordnance, haul themselves upwards and carve out some more stamping grounds.

'So, you wanna deal?' repeated the Jackboy.

'Maybe,' said Snowdog, nodding imperceptibly to Silver.

'Don't be givin' me no "maybe". Yes or no, that's all I wanna hear. I don't give out nothing for nothing. Understand, boy? You take our Kalma, we want something back.'

'Hey, I didn't say I wasn't gonna deal,' soothed Snowdog, 'Let's all just flatline and be cool. We all here to do a little business, not bag n' tag each other.'

The Jackboys seemed to relax at this and moved their hands away from their pistols. They might be hard cases in the High Hive, but they didn't know jack about how negotiations were handled down here in the Badzones.

Snowdog glanced at the petri dish again. Six hundred Kalma drops. It looked pure as well, the best, not cut with chalk or rock powder. This stuff would make you feel like the inside of your brain had been dipped in honey.

The cares of the world could all go to hell while you were on Kalma, at least for a while.

But the good stuff didn't come cheap.

No. These boys were setting him up for something and he sure as hell didn't like the feeling. He'd stayed alive in the Stank this long by trusting his instincts and right now there was a four alarm fire going off in his head. The Jackboys knew he had the connections and the hard cash to pay for this and he also knew they would probably try to keep the drugs *and* the money. Which meant they wouldn't let him leave here alive.

Snowdog was not an especially tall man, but his compact body was rangy and muscled and he could fight like a cornered hellcat. His skin had an unhealthy pallor to it, the result of living in the darkness of the Underhive and his full features were rugged and careworn. His head was crowned with short, bleached blonde hair that was backcombed in short spikes and his brown eyes suspiciously checked out the Jackboys. He wore a pair of black, tiger striped trousers, tucked into a pair of Enforcer's combat boots he'd pulled from a dead Bronze. At his belt hung a long bladed knife and a wire garrotte. His white shirt was printed with a faded holo-patch depicting a rippling explosion that expanded and contracted as he moved. Over this he wore a black leather waistcoat and shoulder holster containing a battered autopistol.

'Look, how much you want for this?' asked Snowdog, 'You got a lot of stuff here, probably more'n I can take in one go.'

'Hey, man. It's cool. We know we got a lot. But we need to get rid of it quick, you know?' said the lead Jackboy, his pitted face right in Snowdog's. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the Jackboys with the shotguns, quietly ease the safeties off their weapons.

Snowdog sat back, folded his arms and, unnoticed, loosened the catch on his autopistol's shoulder holster. He noticed Silver and Tigerlily tensing, readying their muscles for instant action. They knew the drill.

He locked eyes with the Jackboy and shrugged, 'Like I said, how much you want?'

'Ten thousand,' snapped the Jackboy without hesitation.

'Ten thousand...' said Snowdog, knowing what the next question would be.

'You got that kinda cash?'

'Yeah,' said Snowdog, sliding his hand towards his holster.

'Then I guess we'll take all you got!' shouted the Jackboy, snatching for his gun.

Snowdog was quicker.

He whipped out his autopistol and squeezed off a round full in the Jackboy's face. The ganger screamed foully, tumbling backwards, the top of his head blasted clear.

The Jackboys with the shotguns were moving. Chambering shells, they aimed and fired. Snowdog dropped, hitting the deck hard and rolling, firing off an entire clip of wild shots. Tigerlily leapt towards the second Jackboy and rammed her elbow into his throat. She spun low and hammered a slender-bladed dagger into his belly, slicing upwards in one fluid motion. The Jackboy gurgled and fell to the factory floor, dropping his shotgun and grasping his crushed larynx.

Silver calmly fired her pistols, double tapping the second shotgun-wielding Jackboy in the head. Snowdog slid another clip into the grip of his pistol and rose from behind his shelter.

Bullets stitched a path towards him. He spun quickly and fired twice towards a crouching Jackboy. The man grunted, shot in the chest and fell back, blood pouring from his wounds.

Snowdog felt a whipcrack sting to his cheek and dived forwards, reaching for the fallen shotgun. He scooped it up on the roll

and rose smoothly to a crouch, firing off a succession of shots. The noise was tremendous and he whooped with excitement as the Jackboy who'd fired at him went down, his chest punched clean through by the close range blasts.

Silver and Tigerlily worked their way towards him, using every bit of cover available. Neither had even broken sweat. He smiled at them as silence descended on the factory.

'Time to split, girls,' he said.

'Damn straight,' said Silver, 'Bound to be some more Jackboys nearby waitin' for us.'

'Figured as much.'

'Only way outta here that ain't gonna take us into more of these guys is down past the 'nid nests,' pointed out Tigerlily, 'and that ain't gonna be a barrel of laughs.'

'Nope,' Silver agreed. She glanced over the debris they sheltered behind and said, 'What about Lex? We just gonna leave him for the Jackboys? They'll bag n' tag him for sure, man.'

'Damn!' said Snowdog. He'd forgotten about Lex. He'd still be lying there thinking that this was some Kalma related trip-out. He could hear the Jackboy talking on a com unit. More would be here soon, that was for damn sure. He checked his pistol and took Silver's gun also, handing her the Arbites shotgun.

'I'll get Lex. You cover me with this. We'll be out of here and high n' dry before you know it.'



THE STANK darkened at their passing. The black, armour-clad warriors charged down the twisting halls, combat shotguns held at the ready across their broad chests. Dark cloaks trailed behind them, gusted by the sputtering oxy-recyc units. The six man Adeptus Arbites Enforcer Squad, grim men in fully enclosed suits of carapace armour, cast a pall of fear as they passed the stinking hovels and battered habs of the lower hive.

The leader of the squad, Captain Jakob Gunderson, scanned from side to side, alert for a Skum sniper, Wyldern snuff gang or any one of the many other dangers that

lurked in this place. Travelling in such numbers and at this speed made such an attack unlikely, but in the Stank, if you wanted to stay alive, you never took things like that for granted.

The Wall of the Dead in the Precinct House was carved with the names of those who had.

Gunderson was a feared man. His name was spoken in whispers by the denizens of the Stank. It was a name to quell the worst of riots, a reputation to tell over flickering fires by older, wiser heads which nonetheless glanced furtively over their shoulders as though the mere mention of his name would somehow conjure him from thin air.

At six foot seven, Gunderson was a giant of a man, radiating his authority and power like a threat. He was broad and powerfully built, with muscles like slabs of iron beneath his midnight blue carapace armour. He wore his non-reflective bronze captain's badge over his left breast and was helmetless, tiny vox-com beads attached to his larynx and the canal of his ear. A black, protective eye visor shielded his vision.

The ragged residents ducked out of sight of the Enforcers, pulling rusted iron doors shut and hauling tattered strips of cloth over tears that served as windows in their prefabricated steel shacks. Children were dragged indoors, the adults fearing the soldiers of the Adeptus Arbites as much as the feral Stank gangs and tyranid monsters that roamed these regions of Erebus Hive.

They'd intercepted a radio call on an unlicensed frequency moments earlier as they patrolled the outskirts of District Quintus, almost half a kilometre away. Strictly speaking, this area wasn't within their patrol envelope, but a chance to nail that punk Snowdog was too good to pass up.

Snowdog had been a thorn in Jakob Gunderson's side for longer than he cared to remember. Several times Gunderson had almost had the diminutive ganger in his sights, but each time the slippery little fragger had managed to escape him.

He was known to front for a couple of heavy hitters up in the refinery city of Desirata who synthesised Kalma, Spook, Slaught and Throne knew what else in secret factories, shipped it to every hive on the planet and, it was rumoured, off-world.

Snowdog was a major player in the odious underworld of Erebus hive. He ran a fair sized piece of turf with his gang, the Nightcrawlers, and supplied drugs and guns to the ever-hungry population of the hive. What was even more of an affront to Gunderson was that they knew portions of Snowdog's territory included his own Precinct House 13.

As well as being immensely satisfying, a bullet in his head would put a sizeable dent in the drug traffic entering the lower hive from the Desirata.

From the garbled communication his men had intercepted, it appeared that some kind of drug deal had gone wrong and there was a chance Snowdog was involved.

Gunderson carried his shotgun as though it were part of his own flesh, gripping it tight in a vice-like grip. It was set to fire Executioner rounds, hunting shells that would zero in on their target's location. He was taking no chances that Snowdog would get away this time.

He and his squad of five Enforcers reached the collapsed factory their vox-coms had identified as the source of the signal and began climbing the rugged, metal slope of girders and debris towards the entrance, no more than a rusted iron cave mouth.

From inside he could hear screams and gunfire, heavy shotgun blasts and the smaller crack of pistol fire. He racked the slide of his own shotgun, turned to face his men and said, 'No one kills Snowdog but me.'



SNOWDOG HOLLERED and hurdled the crate, firing wildly. Silver rose with him and began pumping shells from the shotgun at the surviving Jackboy. He was well under cover and hopefully the fire she was laying down would keep it that way.

He'd almost reached Lex when he saw he'd made a mistake.

A big mistake.

From his left, the light at the entrance to the factory was suddenly blocked as a team of Bronzes pushed their way inside. He

swore to himself as he recognised the bulky form of their leader and twisted to snap off a couple of shots at him.

He saw them hit, but cursed as they were deflected by the Bronze's heavy carapace armour. Gunderson turned at the sound of the shots and a feral grin spread across his face as he recognised his prey before him. Snowdog veered off to find cover.

Gunderson lifted the shotgun to his shoulder and squeezed the trigger twice.

Snowdog saw the distinctive flashes of Body-Chaser shells as their tiny motors ignited. He knew he was a goner. Bagged n' tagged for sure. He kept running anyway, suddenly changing direction as an idea came to him.

He dived forwards, pulling Lex's doped-up body around and over him.

Sorry, Lex, it's you or me, buddy.

And let's face it. It's you.

He felt the double thump as the 'Chasers slammed into his human shield, blasting a plate sized-hole in him. Lex didn't even make a sound, and Snowdog knew he was so doped up that he probably hadn't even felt the shells hit. Snowdog winced, thinking that if Lex lived, it was going to hurt like a cast-iron bitch when the Kalma wore off. He pulled Lex's body closer as he heard more shotgun blasts. He tensed, expecting the agony of scatter shot flensing the flesh from his bones or a solid shot punching a giant crater in his chest.

But he felt nothing – then realised the shots had come from Silver's direction.

'Run!' yelled Silver, firing again into the group of Bronzes, forcing them to find cover. She'd bought him time and he mentally chalked it up as one he owed her. He scrambled to his feet and crawled round the flattened milling machine, reaching up to grab the petri dish as he went.

Feeling pretty pleased with himself, he didn't notice the last Jackboy until he almost crawled on top of him.

For a second neither moved until Snowdog launched himself forward, lowering his head and slamming his forehead into the shaven-headed ganger's nose. The Jackboy roared in pain, hands flying to his face.

Snowdog sprang onto the squirming Jackboy and forced the barrel of his gun under his chin. He closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. The Jackboy's head exploded, showering Snowdog with blood

and brains, the crack of the gun's discharge lost in a cacophony of shotgun blasts that erupted around him.

Splinters of concrete and glass showered him and he desperately attempted to squeeze himself into as small a target as possible. He could hear Tigerlily and Silver yelling colourful curses and threats at the Bronzes. He tried not to picture the images in his head.

It was clear this situation had gone way too far. Something drastic was required. He checked the clips of each pistol. Each had less than half a mag left. He slowed his breathing, getting ready to go for it. Death or a blaze of glory. Muscles tensed, he was about to move when he caught sight of a dark sheen of metal underneath the Jackboy's bloodstained overalls. He grinned as he reached down and pulled out a leather bandolier with crude, homemade grenades hung along its length.

Some with his name on, he guessed. He was about to unsnap one of the grenades from the bandolier then stopped, smiling to himself.

To hell with it.

He quickly pulled the pins on all the grenades and rose to his feet, swinging the heavy belt round his head. Yelling an obscenity, he lobbed the bandolier towards the sheltering Bronzes.

The boom of a shotgun caused him to duck back behind the crate. But not before he had time to savour the cries of alarm as the Bronzes realised the deadly nature of what he'd thrown them.

The frag grenades simultaneously detonated in the midst of the Arbites troops. Razor-sharp pieces of white hot metal scythed out from the explosion and men died as the shrapnel shredded their bodies. Snowdog covered his ears at the terrific blast as the pressure wave rolled over him, tumbling him from his hiding place. The echoes of the detonation rolled back and forth, mixed with the shrieks of the survivors and the dangerous groaning of tortured metal. The roof now took on a noticeable downward bulge, water beginning to pour from rapidly developing cracks. With hundreds of tons of metal above him, that move with the grenades probably wasn't the best idea he had ever had.

It was time to get greasy and slip away.

He stood and sprinted towards Silver and Tigerlily, sparing a glance at the carnage he'd caused. Three of the Bronzes were dead, a fourth on his knees, clutching his ruined belly, vainly trying to hold in his bloody entrails. The leader he couldn't see. It was too much to hope that Gunderson had been killed; that fragger was way too slippery for that.

Sure enough a black figure rose from behind the wreckage and levelled his shotgun at the running ganger. Silver fired on him, but he didn't flinch. A fragger he may be, but he was a brave one, Snowdog admitted grudgingly. Silver's shot impacted on his armour, but the thick breastplate deflected the shot. Snowdog ducked as Gunderson fired, feeling lashes of hot fire rake across his back as scatter shot scored through his leather waistcoat, shirt and skin.

His ears were ringing with gunfire, but not before he heard the metal ceiling of the factory give out one last hideous metallic scream of protest, chunks of plascrete and metal crashing to the floor. He saw Silver discard the empty shotgun then, following Tigerlily, dart into the corroded sewer entrance they had earlier tagged as their escape route if things went loco. With a wild yell, he lurched and skidded along the floor, following them into the darkness of the sewer entrance.



SNOWDOG BREATHED deeply, then wished he hadn't. The stench of the Erebus hive sewer network was overpowering, shot through with the reeking odours of six million people's waste.

He stood knee deep in foetid, rank effluent, sludgy with refuse. Man, he was never gonna get this off his boots! The darkness was absolute; a number of turns in the sewer had cut off the little light that filtered down into the waste pipe. Snowdog reached into his pocket, grunting as pain razored up his back from the trails the scatter shot had blazed, and withdrew his lighter. He flicked off the brass cap and struck the flint.

Weak light flickered, revealing the full extent of their refuge. The steel pipe was perhaps four and a half feet in diameter and

stagnant with filth. The murky liquid was unmoving, blocked further up the pipe by piles of trash and rubble.

'You okay?' asked Silver genuinely. 'I was sure that Bronze had you tagged for sure.'

'He almost did. He's a stubborn one, that Bronze. He's been lookin' for me for Spirit only knows how long. Didn't get me yet though,' replied Snowdog.

'I think we might be near the bug nests,' said Tigerlily, the fear in her voice unmistakable. 'We're gonna have to step lightly, less we want to end up sliced and diced.'

Snowdog nodded. Ever since the Space Marines had kicked the tyranids off this world, the local boys of the Imperial Guard and Defence Militia had had their hands full hunting the remaining tyranid creatures that had gone to ground in the underhive. Despite their efforts there were still broods of the smaller beasts nesting in the moist darkness of the lower levels of Erebus hive. When the 'nids had attacked the hive, Snowdog had fought hand-to-hand in a militia unit as sickle armed beasts burst through every culvert and recyc unit, slaughtering hundreds of the lower hive dwellers. Snowdog had seen enough of the bugs to last a lifetime and certainly didn't want to see any more.

But the war had been over for three months now and Snowdog had wasted no time in getting back to the serious job of dealing in illegal narcotics and guns. The devotional vids and posters might claim it was every citizen's job to help in the eradication of the tyranids, but for Snowdog, it was back to business as usual.

'You get the Kalma drops?' asked Tigerlily, a carefully hidden longing beneath her casually asked question.

'Yeah, I got some. But nobody gets none 'till we homefree. Last thing we need is you smacked out if the bugs come for us,' said Snowdog, stuffing the petri dish into the pocket of his waistcoat. He grimaced and pointed down into the rank depths of the sewer tunnel. It sloped downwards at a shallow angle, descending into darkness. Now that he had illumination, he noticed the walls were covered in a glistening ooze, a sticky residue that he didn't like the look of at all.

'Looks like we got a long walk ahead of us,' he said. 'Come on, let's go. I don't wanna be hangin' round here longer'n we got to.'

GUNDERSON THREW himself forward as tons of metal and concrete came crashing down. He yelled as a steel beam smashed into his back, slamming him into the ground and he rolled as blocks of stone and iron thundered around him, the noise drowning out his cries of anger and pain. He saw Enforcer Delano crouching next to him, blood streaming from his temple. He jerked his thumb in the direction of the sewer entrance he's seen Snowdog go down.

The ceiling continued to groan in protest and Gunderson knew that to stay here was to die. Rubble was sure to keep falling around them and it would only be a matter of time until they were crushed flat. Gunderson and Delano slithered their way towards the tunnel. Snowdog had a head start, but he wouldn't be expecting any pursuit.

Gunderson would make him pay for that lack of vision.



THE INTERIOR OF the sewer tunnel wasn't the worst place Snowdog could remember being, but it came pretty damn close. The stench was appalling and he didn't want to think what the wriggling movements within the effluent were.

As escape routes went, he'd used better ones.

But any gunfight you walked away from in one piece and with a pocket full of Kalma was a good one, so he guessed he couldn't complain.

At last the tunnel began to brighten slightly before emerging into a high vaulted chamber of dim light and dripping echoes. Tunnels branched off the chamber in all directions and without hesitation Snowdog dropped from the tunnel into the chamber. Picking an opening to his left, he began wading towards it.

They had travelled perhaps ten steps when they found the bodies.

Five Wyldern gangers, their skeletons picked clean of meat. The water around them was still stained with blood, so whatever had done this had reduced them to their bare bones in seconds. The

underhive was full of creatures that could kill a man stone dead, but Snowdog didn't know of any that could do this to a person so quickly. At least not ones of this world. The killing of the Wylderns reeked of tyrannids and he knew they must be close to a nest. Time to get moving.

The Wyldern nearest to Snowdog still clutched a shotgun in a death grip and he grinned as he quickly bent to pick it up.

'Don't even think about it,' snapped a voice from behind him.

He slid his hand towards his holster until the sharp click of a shotgun slide being racked convinced him that it would be unhealthy to continue. He slowly turned and raised his hands in time to see a pair of blood-streaked Enforcers emerge from the tunnel he and the girls had just come from. Gunderson dropped into the water-filled chamber while the second Enforcer covered them with his shotgun.

'That weapon is Imperial property,' said Gunderson. 'Touch it and I'll have to blow you away.'

'You'd like that, huh?'

'More than you know.'

'So why haven't you?' asked Snowdog.

'Oh no,' replied Gunderson. 'You don't get off that easy, punk. I'm taking you in Snowdog. I'm going to chain you up like the animal you are and let the world see me drag you in.'

Snowdog looked over at Silver and Tigerlily, but, like him, they knew that reacting now would just get them all killed. The two Enforcers were on the edge. Their blood was singing and it would only take the slightest hint of resistance to start them blasting. He'd have to play this one ice cool.

'Listen man. You see these skeletons?' said Snowdog, nodding towards the bodies. 'These boys got their asses fragged by the 'nids that went to ground after the war and my gut tells me there's a nest nearby. You start firing that cannon of yours, you're gonna bring a whole bunch of 'em down on us, so what you say we all just keep calm, ok?'

'You killed my men!' shouted Gunderson. 'Don't you dare tell me to be calm! I am calm! Delano, get down here with the cuffs.'

A hoarse gurgling was the only reply to Gunderson's order and he risked a glance behind him to see what the hell Delano was playing at.

Enforcer Delano still crouched in the sewer outlet, but a two-foot long talon now protruded from his body, just above his hip. A look of almost comic surprise twisted his features and he groaned in pain as blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth.

'What the hell...' managed Gunderson as the talon was wrenched from Delano's body and the Enforcer toppled into the water. Behind him, its claws stained bright red, was a lithe, muscled creature with a ridged body and lethal-looking talons. The beast hissed, exposing glistening fangs and its pale eyes burned with alien malevolence.

Its powerful hind legs uncoiled like a powerful spring as the creature leapt from the sewer outlet towards them. It exploded in mid-air as the solid shot from Gunderson's shotgun blew it apart, the echoes of the blast ringing from the concrete walls. Hurriedly he chambered another shell and ran to help the struggling Delano to his feet as the sound of scrabbling claws and alien hissing came from all around them.

It seemed to issue from every outlet. And it was growing in volume.

'Damn...' whispered Snowdog as he tried to pinpoint the source of the noises, 'Look what you gone and done now!'

Another one of the creatures dropped from the roof of the chamber, landing with a splash just behind Snowdog. Its talons lashed out at his neck. He ducked and lowered his head straight into the second beast as it powered from the water, its bony skull smashing into his unprotected face. Blood burst from his nose and he yelled in sudden pain, splashing backwards into the water.

Gunderson and Delano's shotguns fired again as the outlet pipes erupted with dozens of the horrifying beasts, an alien tide of rippling armour plates, chitinous blades and fangs.

Snowdog hauled himself to his knees as two of the creatures stalked through the foamy water towards him. The creatures were hunched over, the front pair of their limbs ending in long, scythe-like blades. He recognised them almost immediately as hormagaunts and he'd fought enough of these beasts during the war to know they were in serious trouble. Their bestial faces were drawn and pale, white, lidless eyes seeming to glow with a killing light.

The lead hormagaunt lifted its head, cocking it to one side, tongue darting in and out of its mouth like a snake's. Snowdog put a bullet between its eyes as the second gaunt launched itself at him. He threw himself flat and the creature sailed over him, landing in a thrashing pile of claws. As it picked itself up, Snowdog emptied the last of the clip into the back of its head.

More of the creatures dropped from the roof or rose from the sewage around them. The heavy boom of shotgun blasts echoed deafeningly around the chamber as Gunderson and Delano fell back towards Tigerlily and Silver, firing as they went. Tigerlily drew her daggers and hammered them through a gaunt's neck, almost severing its head, as Silver snatched her pistols from her weapons belt. Before she could fire, a pair of gaunts leapt from the tunnel behind her and smashed into her back. She cried out and was knocked sprawling, face-first into the water. The beasts' claws tore at her back, their talons raised to strike.

Snowdog slammed a fresh clip into his pistol and fired twice into the soft underbelly of one of the gaunts, blasting it from Silver's back. Gunderson slammed the butt of his shotgun into the second creature's head, splitting it apart with a sickening crunch. He kicked the alien away as Tigerlily pulled the spluttering Silver to her feet. Snowdog stood and waded towards the girls. He could see more Gaunts emerging from the tunnels around them and counted at least a dozen. Suddenly his auto pistol seemed scant protection.

Gunderson glared at Snowdog, his rage an almost physical thing. Snowdog grinned, knowing that the Enforcer now realised that he would need Snowdog's help if he was to survive the next few minutes. Delano propped himself against the concrete wall, his groin and legs awash with blood and his face ashen. A circle of hormagaunts surrounded them, at least twenty now. Snowdog hoped they had enough ammo left to deal with this number of aliens.

He dodged as a hormagaunt leapt at him, its talons slashing. He blasted its chest open and dodged as another pounced. He pulled the trigger and the hammer dropped on an empty chamber. He quickly snatched his knife from his belt.

The bug attacked wildly. Snowdog dodged, spun inside its guard and drove the blade deep into its neck, wrenching it

upwards. They splashed into the water, the gaunt spasming weakly as its lifeblood pulsed from the ruin of its throat.

Snowdog sprang upright, knife at the ready and slashed out at the gaunts next to him. Silver tossed him a fresh clip for his pistol and he slid it home. Gunderson fired into the mass of creatures, each blast blowing a gaunt into bloody shreds.

'We got to get out of here!' shouted Snowdog.

'You think?' Gunderson snapped

'Head for the tunnel behind us, it's the only one these things ain't come from!'

Gunderson nodded and began falling back. The gaunts surrounded them in a rough semi-circle, fangs bared and talons raised. The noose slowly closed, but the aliens held back, seemingly content just to watch their prey.

'Why aren't they attacking?' whispered Silver.

'Who cares?' said Tigerlily. 'Let's get the hell out of here!'

'Sounds good to me,' agreed Snowdog, backing in the direction of the tunnel. The gaunts closed in, moving in time with their beleaguered group. Why weren't they attacking, he wondered? Almost as soon as he formed the thought, his question was answered as a terrifying screech echoed from the tunnel behind the circle of gaunts and a monster from the darkest of nightmares pushed its alien bulk into the chamber.

Snowdog had seen some hellish monsters in his time fighting the tyranids and had paid close attention when the commissars had shown them the instructional vids detailing the various identified types of alien creatures and their horrifying abilities.

But he was still shocked by the hideous appearance of this creature.

Standing taller than a man, its spine was curved and ridged, with overlapping plates of chitinous, red armour. Its head was distended and burnt looking, with white orbs for eyes and a vast jaw filled with row upon row of needle-like fangs. Its rear legs were muscled like the gaunts and, like them, its forelimbs ended in gigantic scythe-like talons. The limbs on its thorax bore clawed hands and the muscles there bunched and relaxed, the fingers flexing rhythmically in time with its foetid breath. The beast's chest was a wetly glistening mass of rippling tissue, pink and raw

looking. Barbed hooks clicked on the exposed bone of its exo-skeleton, almost as though they had a life of their own. Perhaps it had once been a gaunt like the others and the isolation from the hive fleet had driven its internal evolution into overdrive, producing this terrifying pack leader. However it had happened, Snowdog realised, it was bad news for them.

'Emperor save us...' whispered Gunderson. Silver hurriedly scrambled into the outlet behind them and reached back to pull Tigerlily up.

'Come on!' said Silver, extending her hand towards Snowdog. He gripped her wrist and hauled himself into the sewer tunnel as the monstrous beast took a thundering step into the water. Snowdog looked back as Gunderson and Delano faced the huge beast.

'Well shoot the damn thing!' he yelled.

Delano needed no further prompting and squeezed the trigger of his shotgun. At such close range he couldn't miss and Snowdog watched as a blaze of purple energy flared around the beast simultaneously with the shotgun's blast. As the searing afterimage of the flash dissipated, Snowdog saw that the creature was unharmed and knew that it was protected by a kind of naturally generated energy field. He'd seen some of the larger tyranid beasts protected by something similar during the war.

The creature's chest suddenly spasmed, the pink folds of skin rippling and undulating with a grotesque peristaltic motion. Thick cords of tough muscle fibre whipped out towards Delano. The barbed hooks punched through the Enforcer's carapace armour and snagged his rib cage, digging into the meat of his body. The flesh hooks retracted on powerful muscles and hauled the screaming Delano off his feet. Gunderson made to grab him, but wasn't quick enough to prevent the beast from dragging him into its deadly embrace.

Delano slammed into the creature, his screams cut off abruptly as its upper talons stabbed repeatedly into his body. Soon the Enforcer's body was reduced to a pulped mess of torn and bloody flesh, barely recognisable as human. While the beast destroyed Delano, Gunderson leapt for the sewer outlet as the beast dropped the mangled corpse into the water. Snowdog helped him up and they sprinted deeper

into the sewers, the high pitched ululating screeches of the gaunts telling them that the tyranid creatures weren't far behind them.

Gunderson led the way as they moved further into the tunnels, a torch on his shotgun providing some illumination. Snowdog brought up the rear of their small group, casting nervous glances behind him as the screeching increased in volume.

'Come on, come on,' he hissed. 'Let's pick up the pace here people!'

His breath came in short gasps, and he could almost feel the creature's hot breath upon him. He threw a glance over his shoulder as he ran and swore as he saw the outline of the giant beast behind him. *Too close, too close by half!*

The tunnel turned and widened into a large inspection chamber, one with a corroded iron ladder at its centre leading up into darkness. The others were past the ladder, still running, but he knew that to keep going deeper into the tunnels wasn't an option. The beast was too fast and there were more of the smaller ones than they had bullets left.

'Woah!' he yelled, skidding to a halt. 'Up here!'

Snowdog scrambled up the ladder, fear lending his limbs extra speed. He climbed into a wider concrete tube, finally emerging into another tunnel, larger than the one they had just left, but with a sliver of light casting a weak glow from one end. Silver crawled from the hole and rolled to one side as Gunderson's head emerged behind her. No sooner had he clambered out when Tigerlily hooked her arms around the manhole's edge and began hauling herself free.

She screamed suddenly and Snowdog grabbed her wrists and pulled as powerful alien limbs began dragging her back down. Tigerlily continued to scream horribly as Silver and Gunderson lent their strength to holding her. A horrifying ripping noise sounded and at first Snowdog thought her clothes were tearing. Then, a scarlet gout of blood flooded from the girl's mouth and the three fell backwards, still clutching the upper half of Tigerlily's torso. The glimmer of life was still in her eyes and Snowdog watched in horror as the girl's agonised shrieks trailed into a hideous gurgling.

With a deafening cry, the tyranid creature hauled its bulk through the floor of the tunnel and Snowdog howled his rage at the beast. He rolled to his knees and drew his pistol in one motion, aiming towards its head. He squeezed off several shots, but none were able to penetrate the creature's energy field. It lashed out with a taloned arm and sent him flying, slashed from hip to shoulder. Gunderson fired his last few shells at the creature as Silver snatched up one of Tigerlily's fallen knives. The beast towered over Snowdog and he knew that this was it, this was how he was going to check out of this world. Not exactly how he'd planned it.

Its powerful clawed hands, the ones it had used to tear Tigerlily in two, reached down and picked him up, raising him to its fanged maw. Snowdog heard Silver scream his name as he fired the last bullets from his pistol at point blank range into the beast's face. It screeched in agony as one bullet somehow managed to defeat its protective field and blow out its left eye. Its grip convulsed, the claws digging further into Snowdog's body, and he screamed in agony, blood streaming down his sides.

He scrabbled for another weapon, almost insensible from the pain as the claws dug further into his flesh. His hand closed over something in his pocket and he rammed it deep into the creature's throat. He kicked backwards, powering free of the creature's grip, its talons scoring bloody grooves in his body. He felt a bone-jarring impact as his face connected with the concrete and tasted blood as his teeth snapped.

He heard another boom of a shotgun discharge followed by the snap of a hammer slamming down empty. The beast lashed out again at Gunderson's chest, its talon smashing through his armour and laying him open to the bone. The Enforcer tumbled back, unconscious, and dropped his shotgun.

It was all over now, Snowdog realised, and he waited for the fatal blow to land. But for long seconds nothing happened. Then he heard a tortured groaning and an alien hiss of incomprehension.

Snowdog felt a crashing thump beside him and closed his eyes. Eventually, he forced them to open and looked around. The tunnel was eerily quiet, only the sound of ragged breathing and the gentle lap of distant water disturbed the silence. Then

Silver laughed, a high pitched laugh of terrified relief and released tension. Snowdog pushed himself painfully to a sitting position and leaned back against the tunnel wall and stared, disbelieving, at the sight before him.

Flanks heaving slowly with its laboured breathing, the vast tyranid creature lay unmoving on the tunnel's floor. Its fanged head was less than a foot away, thick saliva drooling from its jaws. He closed his eyes and replayed the last few moments in his head: Tigerlily's death, the gunshots and him ramming something down the alien's throat. It obviously hadn't been a grenade as he'd hoped, but what had it been? Then he noticed a few red capsules trailing from between the creature's jaws and suddenly knew exactly what he'd done.

Six hundred Kalma drops in one go!

As he watched, the alien's chest hiked one last time and its heart finally gave out under the sedating effects of the drug. Its long, rattling death cough faded to a low hiss and Snowdog could feel hysterical laughter building inside him. The beast had overdosed on Kalma. Not really surprising, considering it had taken all six hundred doses of the powerful narcotic in one hit. Silver helped him to his feet and together they stared at the beast that had almost killed them all.

'Some day, huh?' remarked Silver.

'Some day,' agreed Snowdog.

Silver nodded towards the unconscious Gunderson and said, 'What you wanna do about him? You want me to finish him off?'

Snowdog shook his head. 'No, I don't think so.'

'Why not? He'd kill you.'

'Probably,' conceded Snowdog. 'But just think how much it's going to eat at him, knowing we could've killed him, but didn't.'

Silver shrugged and said, 'Have it your way.'

Snowdog winced in pain as they limped towards the light at the end of the tunnel, dizzy from blood loss. But any battle with an alien monstrosity you walked away from in one piece was a good one, so he guessed he couldn't complain.

Yeah, thought Snowdog, it was business as usual alright. ○



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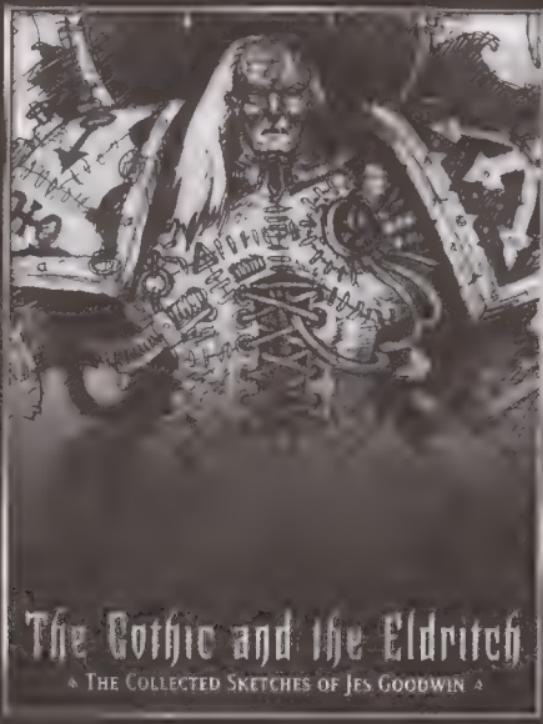
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The Gothic and the Eldritch



The Gothic and the Eldritch

* THE COLLECTED SKETCHES OF JES GOODWIN *

The Collected Sketches of Jes Goodwin

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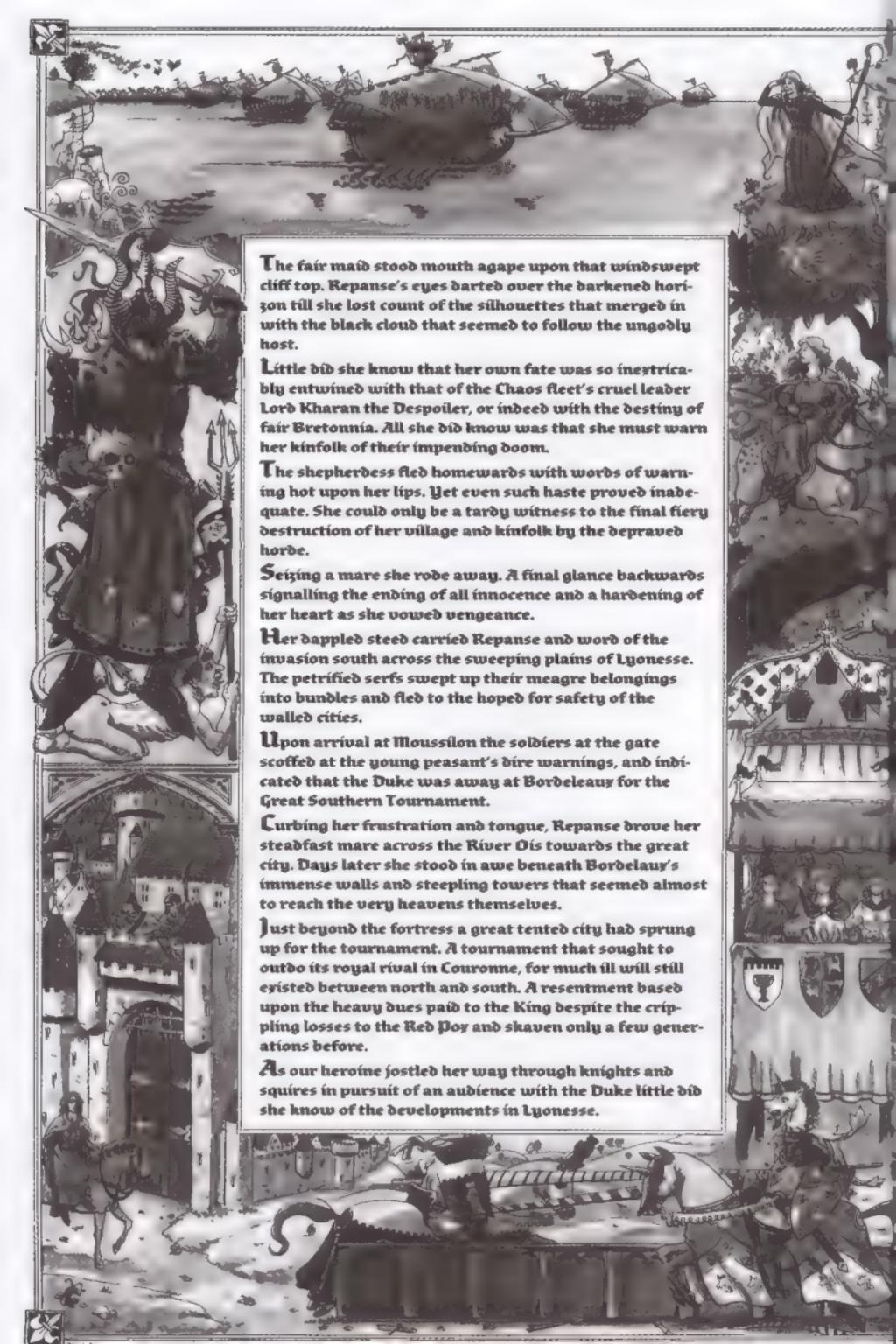
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The Monster and the Maid

A Bretonian Chronicle





The fair maid stood mouth agape upon that windswept cliff top. Repanse's eyes darted over the darkened horizon till she lost count of the silhouettes that merged in with the black cloud that seemed to follow the ungodly host.

Little did she know that her own fate was so inextricably entwined with that of the Chaos fleet's cruel leader Lord Kharan the Despoiler, or indeed with the destiny of fair Bretonnia. All she did know was that she must warn her kinfolk of their impending doom.

The shepherdess fled homewards with words of warning hot upon her lips. Yet even such haste proved inadequate. She could only be a tardy witness to the final fiery destruction of her village and kinfolk by the depraved horde.

Seizing a mare she rode away. A final glance backwards signalling the ending of all innocence and a hardening of her heart as she vowed vengeance.

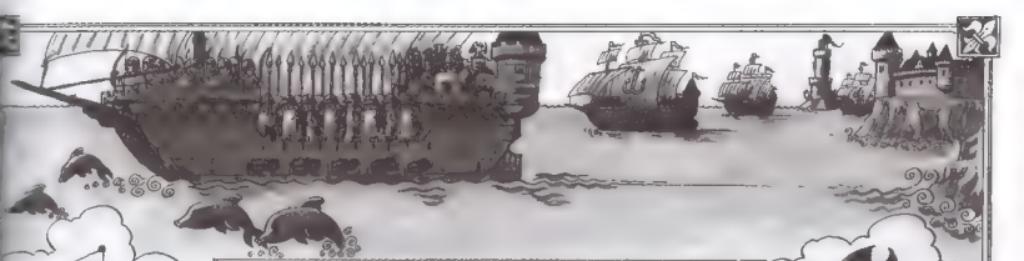
Her dappled steed carried Repanse and word of the invasion south across the sweeping plains of Lyonesse. The petrified serfs swept up their meagre belongings into bundles and fled to the hoped for safety of the walled cities.

Upon arrival at Moussilon the soldiers at the gate scoffed at the young peasant's dire warnings, and indicated that the Duke was away at Bordelau for the Great Southern Tournament.

Curbing her frustration and tongue, Repanse drove her steadfast mare across the River Ois towards the great city. Days later she stood in awe beneath Bordelau's immense walls and steeping towers that seemed almost to reach the very heavens themselves.

Just beyond the fortress a great tented city had sprung up for the tournament. A tournament that sought to outdo its royal rival in Couronne, for much ill will still existed between north and south. A resentment based upon the heavy dues paid to the King despite the crippling losses to the Red Poy and skaven only a few generations before.

As our heroine jostled her way through knights and squires in pursuit of an audience with the Duke little did she know of the developments in Lyonesse.



Nor indeed had our maid been the only harbinger of doom. Word of a war fleet had already reached the grand port of L'Anguille at the mouth of the river Sannes, home to the mighty Bretonnian fleet.

Duke Guillame was used to such incursions and promptly despatched his mighty galleons manned with the city's garrison, a force he was confident could defeat any opponent upon the seas.

This hasty decision proved to be a tragic miscalculation. Rounding the jutting headlands of Lyonesse the great fleet saw the broad golden beaches lined with the burnt carcasses of hundreds of ships. Lord Kharan's aim was clearly total conquest, a set route upon which there would be no turning back.

The dark cloud that blotted out the weak rays of the rising sun over L'Anguille soon revealed its true nature as figures swept down from the broiling mass. The talons of the daemonic harpies tore sentries from their posts upon the city walls, their unearthly cries quickly mingling with the screams of the populace.

These airborne furies had opened the city gates and a throng of demented slaughterers poured through the narrow streets. Blades sliced through flesh and bone, causing rivers of blood to flow across the cobbles.

Rubbing sleep from his eyes the Duke saw the destruction of L'Anguille from within his high tower, a structure only overshadowed by the great lighthouse that comprised the bulk of his keep, itself standing upon a pinnacle of rock in the estuary mouth. Around its base mud flats spread, differentiated only by a narrow stone causeway that stretched towards the quayside, and along which a fearsome horde now plunged.

Guillame allowed himself a wry smile for he knew that the tide was rising. The leading marauder had barely set foot upon the stone steps cut into the rock when first the wave swept him and his loathsome companions to their doom.

His smile quickly faded as he witnessed the assailants plunge from the quay into the sea. Soon the sunken causeway rose above the water, a layer of armoured bodies creating a dry pathway upon which steel clad feet charged inexorably onwards. Buckling his armour he issued a prayer to the Lady.





The Royal Tournament had reached its conclusion and King Henri was enjoying his favourite dish of quails' tongues when news of the fall of L'Anguille reached the court at Couronne.

Leaping to his feet, the King's champion, Sir Maurice, declared that all the Barons were already gathered here, and that an army could move on the morrow. The older Baron Gregoire de Montfort counselled caution, after all half the kingdom's forces were in Bordeaux. Defence first, then attack, was his favoured strategy.

Sir Maurice countered that the Southern Barons were ill-mannered wretches, who failed to show true obedience to the King, and were not worthy to serve under his banner.

Sadly our King Henri was a feeble man, both in body and spirit. He was easily swayed by the fiery passion of his young champion. Waving his fork indolently he indicated that his war banner should be raised, and that Sir Maurice should lead the force.

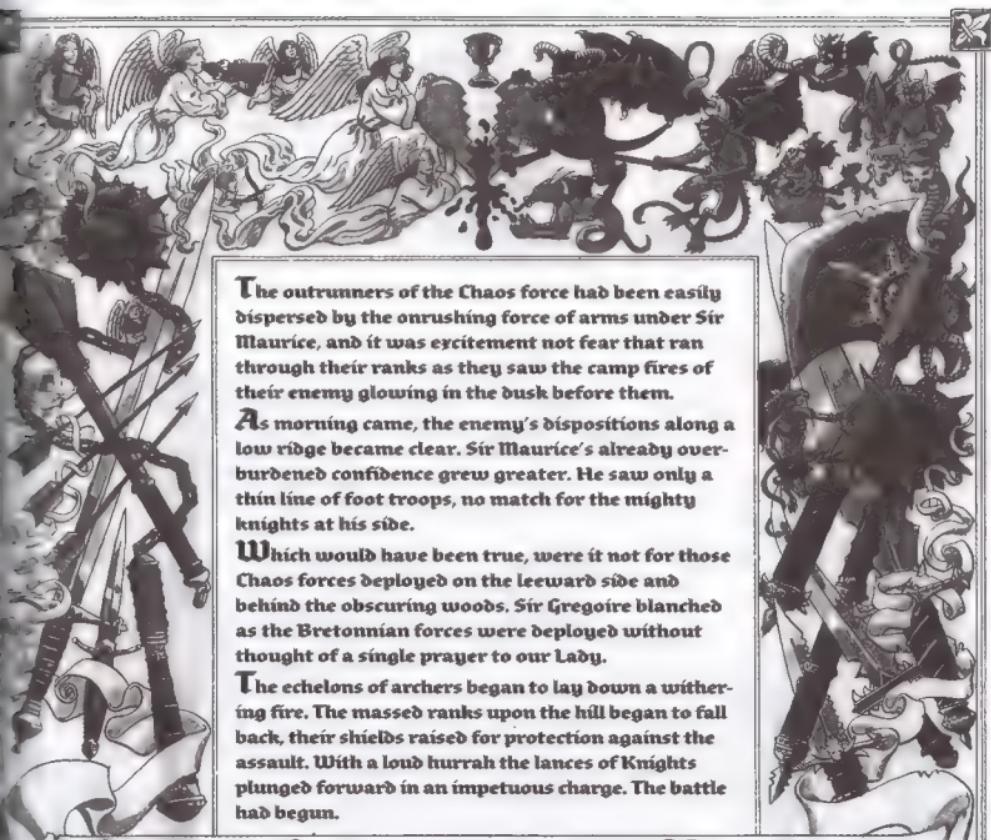
Baron Gregoire muttered into his goblet dark words about a King too weak to lead his own army, but any such thoughts were drowned out by the wine-fuelled cries for blood and honour of his fellows.

The morn saw the flower of Bretonnian knighthood ride out from under the shadow of Couronne's immense walls. Pennants fluttered merrily in the breeze. Sir Maurice led the grand host, smug anticipation upon his face, and Queen Eleonore's colours wrapped around his lance.

Lord Kharan's forces were also on the move. It seemed that no amount of destruction would satisfy their blood-lust. A growing pall of smoke was left in their wake as the fearsome force's relentless march continued along the banks of the Sannez, ever deeper into the heart of our fair Bretonnia.

The fleet had returned to L'Anguille but, witnessing nought but devastation and fearing their fate upon the land, they turned about and headed south for the ports there.

Thus the fate of Bretonnia seemed to hang on the outcome of the battle that was soon to be joined along the steep banks of the meandering River Sannez.



The outrunners of the Chaos force had been easily dispersed by the onrushing force of arms under Sir Maurice, and it was excitement not fear that ran through their ranks as they saw the camp fires of their enemy glowing in the dusk before them.

As morning came, the enemy's dispositions along a low ridge became clear. Sir Maurice's already overburdened confidence grew greater. He saw only a thin line of foot troops, no match for the mighty knights at his side.

Which would have been true, were it not for those Chaos forces deployed on the leeward side and behind the obscuring woods. Sir Gregoird blanched as the Bretonnian forces were deployed without thought of a single prayer to our Lady.

The echelons of archers began to lay down a withering fire. The massed ranks upon the hill began to fall back, their shields raised for protection against the assault. With a loud hurrah the lances of Knights plunged forward in an impetuous charge. The battle had begun.

Order of Battle

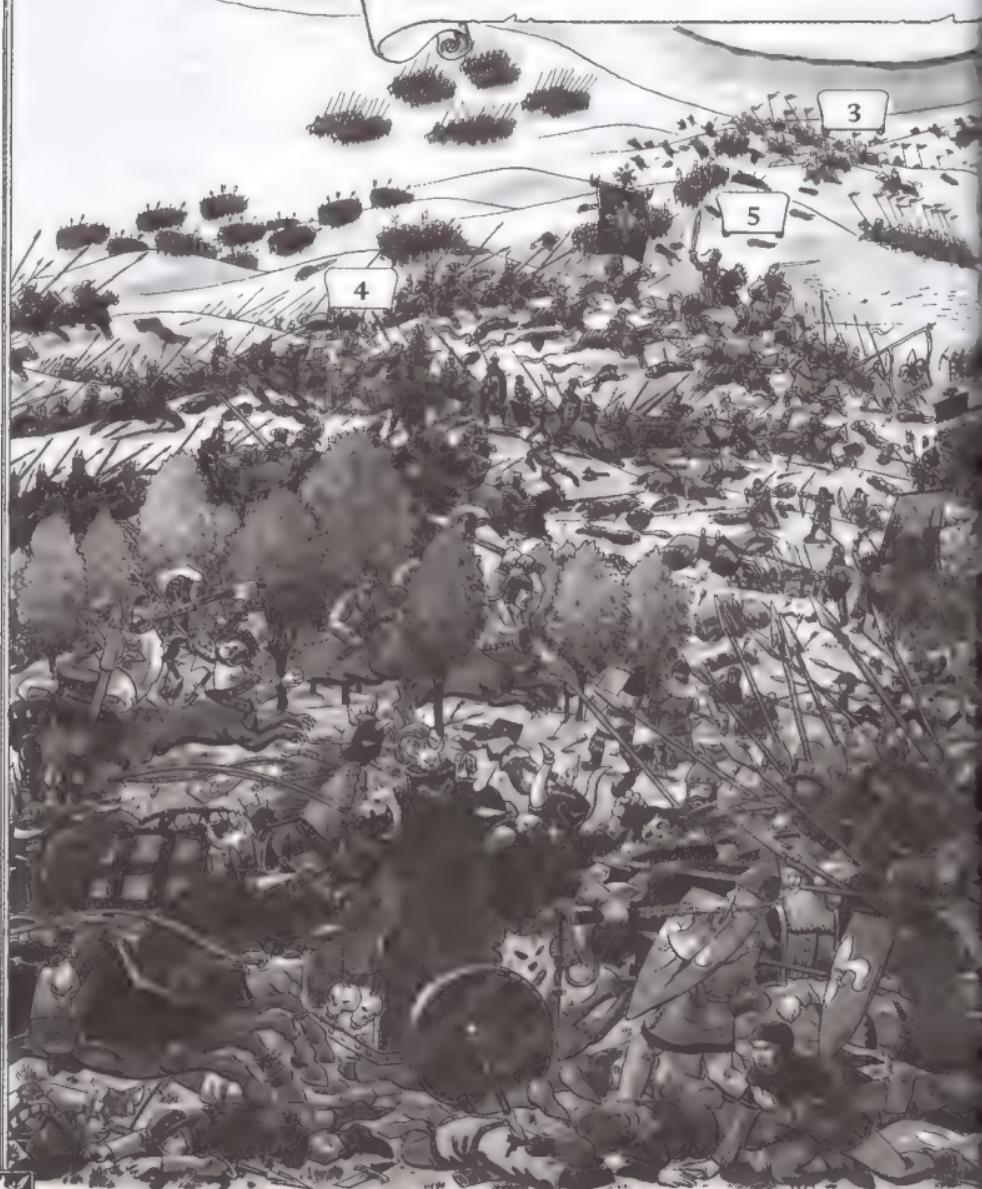
Chaos Horde

Bretonnian Forces



THE BATTLE

The reckless charge met its first obstacle at Guibert's Brook. marshy ground sucked in many steeds up to their shanks (1). The now-irregular ranks swarmed by the archers, many slower peasants being trampled underfoot by the bloodlusting knights (2) whose weary mounts laboured up the slope before smashing into the enemy ranks (3) which, despite falling back under the bow had merely been redeploying to spring Lord Kharan's trap. His own shock troops counter-charged into the battling mass (4). Reeling under lance, claw and blade, the shocked knights were forced back down the ridge.



OF LAMENTATIONS

Their only possible salvation lay in the men-at-arms who were following up with spear and halberd. Sir Maurice urged his fellows to hold firm, and spying the Despoiler made a lunge for the wader. Cackling through his daemonic visor, the brutal monster struck down the King's champion (5). The Bretonnian foot wavered as the King's banner dipped and fell. Then the snare was pulled tight as chariots burst onto their flank (6). Our countrymen despaired of victory as the slaughter began. The winged harpies finally swept in to finish off the fallen (7). As dusk fell the fading sun illuminated the red waters of the brook.





Mortally wounded, Sir Gregoire fell to his knees clutching his sword and prayed to Our Lady for forgiveness for their arrogance, and protection for Bretonnia. A smile was said to illumine his face as the axe removed his head.

Daemonic howls echoed across that vale of tears throughout the night as the victors pledged renewed allegiance to their own unholy cause.

Couronne's streets were quickly filling with an influx of panicked subjects, whilst King Henri in his own haste rapidly despatched heralds to the south.

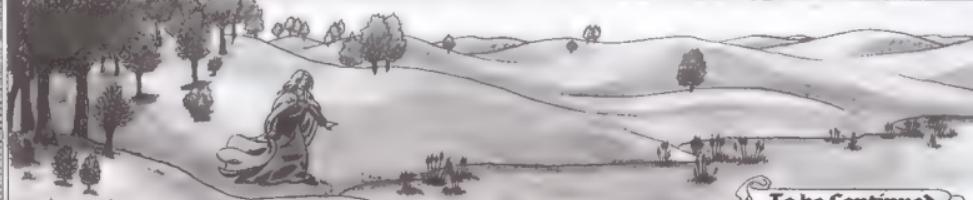
But let us not forget that our heroine Repanse had been trying to rally the Dukes in Bordelauz herself. She succeeded in forcing her way through the crowd at the tournament, and flung herself down in prostrate obesiance before the stand of Duke Herve de Bordelauz.

As guards moved forward to wrest her away, her voice rang out clearly, pleading for the Duke to lead a force northwards to crush the heretic that had destroyed her home and family.

Raising his hand in signal to the guards to desist, the Duke listened intently. Then he answered in his own strong baritone that it was his duty, and the duty of those around him to defend their homelands, and so they would do. Yet those Dukes in the north had treated them ill the past, and continued so to do with the heavy dues asked of his kin. They had not sacrificed a generation of noble Knights to defend Brionne and Quenelles, nor had they smote the blow that destroyed the rat-things in 1813. Now neither would he aid them in this year of Our Lady 2006.

A cheer rose from amongst the crowd. His words echoing the feelings of all who heard. All apart from our fair maid, who despaired at the rifts that divided our fair land in those times. She knew that divided... yet those thoughts were too dire to even contemplate.

Bone weary from her desperate ride and spirit wearied from the ignoble souls around her, she fled the jousting fields. Tears blinded her to the path she took, letting the winds of destiny guide her course. No heed did she take to the miles of farmland, then woods she passed, only coming to a halt when her path lay blocked by an expanse of water. A lake.



To be Continued



WHITE DWARF

White Dwarf is Games Workshop's monthly magazine. Each issue showcases all the latest games and miniatures and is packed with exciting articles including tactical advice on how to get the most from your army on the field of battle, tips for painting your miniatures and tense battle reports highlighting the trials and tribulations of commanding an army.

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RAPTOR DOWN

By Guy Thorpe

THE FLIGHT DECK was a hive of activity. The murmuring of tech-priests resounded off the high gantries amongst the chatter of rivet guns and the clank of ordnance loaders. Welding torches sparked bright blue-white in the yellow glow of the standby alert lighting and figures hurried to and fro. The Marauders of Raptor and Devil squadrons were arrayed herringbone-fashion along the length of the maintenance bay as tech-adepts and servitors crawled across them, repairing battle damage and loading new ordnance. Flight Commander Jaeger stood and watched it all with a faint sense of satisfaction. Everyone was performing well today – the pilots, their gunners and bombardiers, and the bay crews were all operating like a well-oiled machine. He cupped his hands to his mouth to shout across the din.

'Ferix, how are the repairs going?' he bellowed across the decking to the robe-swathed tech-adept monitoring the maintenance on Jaeger's own Marauder, Raptor One. Ferix hurried over with short, quick steps and nodded curtly. Over the adept's shoulder, Jaeger could read the insignia that he himself had painted onto the nose of Raptor One after their last mission. It was the raptor's motto – *Swift Justice, Sure Death* – in bright white against the dark blue paint of the Navy colours. Underneath in gold was the squadron emblem, an eagle rampant in shining gold. It was reassuring to Jaeger, the familiarity he now shared with Raptor One after their bloody baptism together a year and a half ago.

'All craft are battle-worthy, Flight Commander Jaeger,' Ferix told him, his hands concealed within the voluminous sleeves of his robes. 'Raptor Three should be de-commissioned for several more hours preferably, but is operational within tolerable limits.'

'Good, let me know as soon as weapons load and check is complete. I'll be on the bridge,' Jaeger dismissed Ferix with a wave of his hand and turned away. As he walked across the flight deck, he cast his gaze around him, looking at the bulky shapes of the Marauder bombers in the gloom and the smaller Thunderbolt interceptors in the launching alcoves on the far side of the massive chamber.

All this is my domain now, he thought, not for the first time. It had been eighteen months since Raf's death left Jaeger in charge, a year and a half of responsibility to command and lead nearly a hundred pilots and flight crewmen, to mould them into a fighting team worthy of the Imperial Navy.

He could see the men of his own squadron, the Raptors, taking a well-earned meal break at the battlestation mess tables on the starboard side of the flight deck. He saw the veterans – strong, disciplined men like Marte, Arick, Phrao and Berhardt. But there were too many new faces for the flight commander's liking, men untested in the heat of battle until today. For a year the cruiser *Divine Justice* had continued her patrol, unable to replace the losses she had suffered at the hands of the orks. Only three months ago she had returned to dock and new crews were drafted in from the flight schools. Unlike the ratings, flight crews needed to be trained professionals; you couldn't just send a press gang onto some Imperial world and see what you dredged

up. For a year the *Divine Justice* had been home to only half the aircraft her holds could carry and launch. Jaeger was glad that they had seen no serious action during the rest of the patrol – a few skirmishes with outclassed pirates, the odd smuggler, but nothing like the baptism of fire and death that had been the duel with the ork hulk.

Jaeger realised he was at the lifter now, and stepped into the small chamber. He cranked the dial to 'Bridge deck' and slammed the grating shut. A moment later he was swiftly ascending amongst the clatter of chains and gears, the floor of the lifter shaking gently beneath his booted feet.

Untried boys! he cursed to himself. But for all his worries, the operation was proceeding with little difficulty. Having barely had time to refit and re-crew at Saltius, the *Divine Justice* and her three frigate escorts, the *Glorious*, the *Apollo* and the *Excellent*, had been despatched with orders to support the Imperial Guard invasion of the Mearopyis system. Even now, they were in orbit over the third world of the system, running escort to the dropships and making ground attacks against enemy supply bases and communications centres.

They were here to fight the Noctal – spindly, insectoid aliens who had conquered Mearopyis and enslaved its human population several thousand years ago. Finally, the Imperium had arrived to take it back and once more bring the light of the Emperor to the people of the subjugated world. Casualties had been light so far. Admiral Veniston's rites of engagement had been very specific. The Noctal fighters were incapable of orbital flight, unlike the Thunderbolts and Marauders of the *Divine Justice*. The squadrons were hitting hard and fast, dropping from orbit, bombing and strafing their targets before powering back up to the ships waiting above, safe from harm. The enemy fighters were swift and agile, but they couldn't be everywhere at once and only a single Marauder had been lost, and no Thunderbolts had yet been taken down. Jaeger had heard that the squadrons from the other ships of the fleet were having similar successes.

Perhaps this is not such a bad time to test out the new hands, Jaeger considered. No massed air battles, strict orders and a safe haven would allow his men to settle, with enough risk to keep them on their toes but also safe enough that they'd survive to learn from the experience. Survival was the key, in Jaeger's mind. No flight commander wanted

a continuous draft of newcomers flying his craft; he wanted experienced, dedicated crews who would return time and again, their mission complete.

With a thunk, the lifter reached the top of its shaft, eighteen decks up from the flight bays. Jaeger pulled back the door and stepped out, swapping a salute with a gunnery lieutenant who stepped past him. He marched up to the double doors leading to the bridge and nodded to the shotgun-wielding armsman standing guard. The armsman turned and activated the commset on the wall behind him, announcing Jaeger's presence. There was an affirmative and several seconds later the bridge doors swung back with a hiss of hidden pistons. Stepping through, Jaeger saw the bridge was in its normal state of organised confusion. Tech-adverts scurried to and fro, augur and surveyor servitors announced target dispositions in monotonous drones, officers snapped orders over the comm net and flunkies and menials of every description hurried here and there taking notes, making reports or simply repeating messages from one officer to the next.

In the middle of it all stood Captain Kaurl, like a rock amidst the swirl of a rising tide. The stocky, bearded officer had his hands clasped behind his back, his feet spread as if braced on a buffeted dropship rather than a stately cruiser. He nodded as a lieutenant passed on some piece of data and then looked at the main viewing screen. It dominated the centre of the bridge, five metres high, twice as long.

The main picture showed a duel between three Imperial cruisers and two Noctal superdestroyers. Cannon-fire and missiles streaked from the Emperor's vessels, flaring into bright green flashes as they impacted on the energy shields of the alien ship. Bright white las-fire erupted from one of the superdestroyers, a flickering coruscation of energy bolts that impacted on the void shields of one of the cruisers, their energy dissipating harmlessly.

Various sub-images charted fleet positions, drop ship manoeuvres and sundry other details. In the bottom left, a tracker field flickered on and off in one of the *Divine Justice*'s docking bays, drawing a supply shuttle down onto the armoured deck, heat wash from its engines causing the image to waver on the screen. To the top right, a spread of torpedoes rocketed across the void. As they neared a Noctal vessel the front of each peeled open, ejecting a storm of plasma

and fusion warheads which rippled across its silver-grey hull in a riot of orange and red. Along the bottom of the screen, wings of Starhawk bombers manoeuvred between the las-fire of a superdestroyer's defence turrets, the armoured surface of the alien ship splintering into a shower of shrapnel as their bombs punched deep inside before exploding.

Jaeger turned his attention back to the main image and watched as retro thrusters flared into life along the length of one of the Imperial cruisers. Slowed in its course, it began to sweep to starboard, turning slowly at first but gathering pace as its forward momentum slowed. Another jet of engines halted the turn and the main engines increased to full. Its broadside opened fire again and this time the Noctal shields failed, missiles and plasma blasts raking into its engine decks. Fires blossomed and spread, burning white hot as air rushed out of the punctured hull of the enemy superdestroyer in explosive bursts.

'Jacques!' Kaurl called out, snapping Jaeger's attention from the ongoing space battle.

'Sir!' he replied crisply, saluting formally which the captain returned with an equally formal nod.

'How are things going?' Kaurl asked, taking Jaeger by the arm and leading him into his personal cabin off the main bridge. It was fitted out in wooden panelling, a deep red grain that leant an air of calm. He sat beside the captain on a long sofa whose plush covers matched the rich décor of the room.

'I have made post-mission reports, sir,' Jaeger replied with a frown. 'Everything is in there.'

'Not everything, Jaeger,' smiled Kaurl. 'Numbers, yes, but nothing else. They don't tell me how you *feel* the invasion is progressing.'

'Everything seems to be going smoothly, exactly to plan I would say,' Jaeger told the captain after a moment's thought. 'Better than planned.'

'And that worries you?' Kaurl seemed to read Jaeger's thoughts.

'Every plan is perfect until it makes contact with the enemy,' Jaeger recited the line from the Navy battle dogma. 'Then it usually falls apart; it doesn't exceed expectation.'

'Emperor's blood, man!' cursed Kaurl, standing up and glowering at his flight commander. 'Are you never happy?'

'No, sir, I'm not,' Jaeger replied solemnly, looking back up at Kaurl, his face impassive.

That was slightly untrue, he thought; I'm happy when I'm flying. That's the only time. A thought occurred to him then. There was someone he hadn't seen over the past twelve hours since the attack had begun. 'Where is Admiral Veniston, sir?'

Admiral Knight has been recalled to sector command. Veniston has taken command of the fleet and transferred his flag to the battleship *Holy Dignity*, Kaurl answered. 'I've got my own ship back, thank the Emperor,' he added with a conspiratorial grin.

'Not meaning to be rude, sir, but the Raptors will be ready to launch any minute,' Jaeger fidgeted with the collar of his flight suit and glanced at the chronometer sat on the desk behind Kaurl.

'Of course, Jacques, you get out there and bomb them to hell and back,' Kaurl nodded towards the door. Jaeger nodded thankfully and hurried out on long strides.

'I almost feel sorry for the Noctal,' Kaurl muttered to himself as the door closed behind the eager flight commander. 'Almost.'



TARGETS ALL stored, weapons ready to go,' Berhandt announced gruffly.

Jaeger glanced to his right across the cockpit towards his bombardier. He opened the comm channel to the rest of the Marauders. Both the Raptors and the Devils were in on this one, escorted by the interceptors of Arrow and Storm Squadrons.

'Everyone has their orders, let's make sure this one goes smoothly,' he told them.

++They won't know what's hit them!++ crowed Phrao's tinny voice in Jaeger's ear.

++We gonna make a fireball so big they'll see it back on board!++ chipped in Logan, squadron leader of the Devils.

'Let's cut the gossiping. Prepare for atmospheric entry. Let's not lose our heads,' Jaeger chided them. In the last twelve hours they had flown five missions with nine-tenths of their targets utterly destroyed. He wasn't about to lose a craft because some hothead forgot their procedures.

++Raptor Leader, this is Arrow Leader, moving ahead to intercept positions.++ Squadron Leader Dextra's voice was quiet and distant over the comm-link.

++Raptor Leader, this is Storm Leader, taking position on your rear quarter.++ Losark added as Jaeger watched the bright spark of the Arrow's engines forging ahead towards the world below.

It nearly filled the cockpit; a yellowish globe swirled with orange and red dust clouds. Down there, three quarters of a million Imperial Guardsmen were forging their way across the plains, in a massive strike determined to seize the Noctal's capital within a day. The Imperial strategy relied upon a single swift hammerblow that destroyed the Noctal's command before their reserves could react and bring superior numbers to bear on the Emperor's soldiers. And so far it seemed to be working – resistance was scattered, the Noctal seemed to have had no warning that the Imperium had arrived. The first the aliens had known of the attack, Imperial dropships had already touched down.

The Marauder began to shudder as it entered the upper atmosphere of Mearopyis. The control stick in Jaeger's hand began to judder as the air resistance strengthened. Thermals and turbulence began to make the massive aircraft dip and weave as it streaked down towards the clouds. Ahead Jaeger watched the shapes of the Thunderbolts commanded by Dextra disappear into the cloud cover, slipping silently from view. As air pressure built, Jaeger disengaged the attitude jets along the Marauder's wings; it would fly like a conventional aircraft now. As the first few wisps of cloud began to coalesce across the cockpit windows, Jaeger turned the comm-link dial to talk to the *Divine Justice*.

'This is Raptor Leader. Entering cloud cover now. What's the latest on enemy craft?' he reported.

There was a pause, and Jaeger could imagine the bustle on the bridge as a lieutenant sought out the information and relayed it to the comms officer.

++Raptor Leader, this is *Divine Justice*. Small enemy interceptor patrol last reported one hundred and fifty kilometres to local west. Larger concentration, approximately fifteen craft seen over target area at 0844 ship chronology.++

Jaeger absorbed this news without comment. As the air campaign had continued, the enemy had responded and now there were fewer targets left, it was inevitable that they would receive better air cover. Jaeger had argued hotly that the Noctal airbases were the target of the first strikes, but Kaurl had informed him that priority had been given to targets that stood in the path of the advancing Imperial army.

'Time to target?' he asked Berhardt. The bombardier glanced at a screen to his right.

'About twenty minutes, depending on headwind,' Berhardt replied with a shrug.

Jaeger thought this over in silence. The last report had been thirty minutes old, plus another twenty minutes until they arrived. Would the enemy aircraft still be there? Would there be more of them or less?

'*Divine Justice*, this is Raptor Leader. Please inform me as soon as new data available on target's air cover.'

As he made the request, Jaeger forced himself to relax. Adaptability was one of his greatest strengths, and he felt confident he could react to whatever situation developed.

But can the others, he asked himself sourly? This invasion was the first time many of them had been under fire. So far their orders had been simple to execute and had gone by the book. How well would they react under real stress, with Jaeger barking orders out over the comm-net; orders that might save them from being shot down if followed quickly and accurately? He had drilled them long and hard in the simulators and on training flights, mercilessly pushing them each time, berating them loudly for the smallest errors. They thought he probably didn't know, but he'd heard they called him the Iron Tyrant for his strict, disciplined approach. He didn't care; they could call him all the names in the Imperium if it meant they listened to him and learnt from his experience.

He had served under three flight commanders over nearly ten years as an Imperial Navy pilot. All three had impressed upon him the importance of duty and discipline, and it was a message he was determined to impart to his own men. He felt a responsibility to each of them, to give them the training and leadership they needed to excel, to become what the Emperor expected of them. It was why he was so hard on them, why he was the Iron Tyrant, because each small failure reflected on him in his own conscience.

'Arrow leader, move ahead and see what's waiting for us at the target,' Jaeger ordered into the comm. 'Storm Leader, remain in position ready to engage enemy from the west.'

He hated fighting blind; the memory of the attack on the space hulk was still burnt into his mind. Twenty-one men had died that day because no one had told them what they were up against. Veniston had called it 'acceptable losses', but there was no such phrase in Jaeger's head. No loss could be tolerated and already he felt guilty for the crew of Devil Five who had been shot down by groundfire on the first mission over Mearopyis.

This time is different, he told himself, trying to build up some conviction. This time our orders are simple. We have rules of engagement written specifically to protect my men. In, attack and then out again. They were the rules and he was bound by his duty to the navy and his men to follow them.

++Raptor Leader, this is Storm Leader. We have enemy incoming from the west. Permission to engage?++

'Go ahead, Losark,' Jaeger replied, staring out of the cockpit window towards the west for some hint of the enemy aircraft, but nothing was to be seen yet.

++Okay Storm squadron, let's chalk up some more kills++ confirmed Losark, making Jaeger smile inside his facemask. The Storm squadron leader was the best dogfighter on the *Divine Justice*, but Dextra was his senior by two years and was always just a few kills ahead in his tally. Jaeger had wagered extra drink rations to the whole of Raptor squadron that Losark would surpass his rival's total by the end of the campaign.

He watched as the Thunderbolts, eight of them, screamed overhead and banked to starboard. The squadron split into two wings of four craft each, one accelerating up towards the cloudbase, the other dipping towards the ground. Jaeger saw a sparkle in the distance – the Mearopyis star glinting off metal as the enemy fighters closed in.

'Maintain course to target,' the flight commander ordered the Marauders. 'Gunners prepare for interlocking fire, pattern omega.'

As he finished, he heard the whine of electric motors as Marte swung the fuselage gun cradle into position. Through the reinforced screen, Jaeger watched as missile trails ghosted away from Storm squadron arrowing their way across the skies towards

the Noctal plains. A moment later and a bright explosion lit up the sky, an expanding star of blue created by a missile's impact. As the blast dissipated, a haze of white smoke was left drifting on the gentle wind.

'One less alien,' Berhardt muttered contentedly to himself from beside Jaeger.

The dogfight approached closer as the speedier Noctal fighters burst between the two Thunderbolt formations, intent on the bombers. Jaeger saw vapour trails arcing across the sky as the Imperial interceptors banked round to follow the alien craft, but he knew they were too slow to catch them and the Marauders would have to look to their own guns for protection.

'Power up the lascannon,' Jaeger ordered Berhardt, who gave a satisfied grunt and swivelled his seat to grip hold of the nose-gun's controls. Jaeger switched the comm-link to address all of the Marauders.

'Hold your fire, wait for my order,' he steadied them, knowing that if one trigger-happy soul started firing, the rest would join in and probably waste their limited ammunition.

He could make out the Noctal planes more clearly as they streaked towards him at the front of the double arrowhead of Marauders. They were racing in fast, keeping a tight formation. That was good; the closer the aliens stayed together, the more chance the firing from the turrets would hit something. Another ten seconds trickled past as Jaeger watched the bright specks turn into distinct shapes.

A bolt of green energy erupted towards the bombers as the lead craft fired its laser, the flash passing comfortably overhead.

'All crews, open fire!' Jaeger bellowed into the comm-mike. An instant later Raptor One shook with the thunder of autocannons and heavy bolters firing and a stream of tracer rounds soared across the shrinking gap between the two squadrons. More las-bolts blasted past, one so close it left a streak of after-image seared across Jaeger's eyes for a few seconds.

'Come on, up a bit... up a bit, you alien scum!' muttered Berhardt, his face pressed down into the targeting visor of the lascannon. The Noctal had dipped, trying to take the Marauders from below. But there was to be no refuge there either, as the guns of the lower squadron, the Devils, opened fire and the three sleek aircraft were surrounded by a storm of tracers.

'Got yer!' cackled Berhardt, pressing the firing stud. The lascannon burst into life, a beam of white energy lancing out to pass straight through the nearest foe. The enemy craft disintegrated, its triangular wings spiralling groundward until they were out of sight, the main fuselage utterly vaporised. As the Noctal planes screamed past, Jaeger got a good look at their shape. They were like blunt darts, their stubby delta wings stretching from in front of the cockpit to the rear of the plane. Four tail fins surrounded bright blue jets as Jaeger tracked its course through the side screen, looking over his shoulder as it zoomed away.

Fire from Raptor Four, Phrao's Marauder, caught one wing of the Noctal fighter, shredding it into hundreds of shrapnel fragments that scattered in its wake. Control lost, the plane went into a wild rolling spin, tumbling headlong through the rest of squadron, whose gunners easily tracked it and sent a fusillade of fire into it until finally it broke in half before exploding.

++I'll get the last one++ Losark assured him over the comm.

'How many kills behind now?' asked Jaeger, laughing softly.

++Three to go, Raptor Leader++ came the squadron leader's reply, his eagerness conveyed even across the crackling comm-net.

The Thunderbolts soared past just metres away, afterburners on full, the wash of their passing juddering the control column in Jaeger's right hand.

'Continue course to target, estimated time to attack is...' Jaeger glanced up at the chrono-display in the top left corner of the cockpit window. 'Thirteen minutes.'



FIVE MINUTES until target in sight,' Berhardt's rough voice reported.

Jaeger glanced over towards the muscled bombardier who was intent on his bomb targeter. The glowing green display underlit his face as he stared into the aiming reticule, making final adjustments to the optics with a series of switches and dials on his control panel. He never took his eyes from the reticule. Instead his fingers danced over the controls as if powered by a will of

their own - in fact they were driven by a familiarity only years of experience could develop.

If they survive, all of the crews will be as good as him, thought Jaeger as he watched the bombardier at work. It's up to me to ensure that they do.

Jaeger knew that at times he was guilty of pride, but he had a dream that one day Raptor squadron and the *Divine Justice* would be recognised as the best across the whole segmentum. He wanted the admirals at Bakka to know he was there, to hear of his great work. It was a good ambition, he told himself.

The flight commander turned his attention back outside the canopy as the Marauders' altitude dropped. They were to make a low-level attack first, dropping their massive payload of incendiary explosives on an enemy bunker complex. After circling around they would make a second attack run with missiles and lascannons, picking off anything smoked out by the firebombs. It was straight out of the tactics manuals, performed in drills and simulated battles a dozen times by the pilots and bombardiers.

A subtle movement to Jaeger's right caught his attention. Something was stirring in the yellow haze to the south-west. It looked to Jaeger like a dust cloud, quite a large one, several dozen kilometres away. Checking the gauges above his head, Jaeger noted a strong headwind, which would probably blow the dust storm in their direction. Concerned, he opened up the long-range comm channel.

'Divine Justice, this is Raptor Leader. Any reports of storm activity on our approach?' he asked, still looking intently at the swirling cloud of ochre sand and dust.

++That is negative, Raptor Leader. Strong winds, low cloud, no storm activity++ came the reply after several seconds.

'Okay, *Divine Justice*. Please monitor this channel, I may have found something,' Jaeger told the officer in orbit, an uneasy feeling growing in the pit of his stomach.

Turning in his seat, Jaeger punched a few runes on the screen display and, after a swirl of static, a chart of the local geography was superimposed over the front canopy window. He focused the map onto his current recorded location and, glancing up again to check the direction towards the storm, placed its position. It seemed to be issuing from a long canyon complex that ran for hundreds of kilometres perpendicular to

the axis of the Imperial attack, some twelve kilometres behind the forward Guard positions.

'They would have checked it out,' he muttered to himself. Berhardt looked up at him quizzically.

'Somethin' wrong?' the bombardier asked, looking out of the cockpit to follow Jaeger's gaze.

Ferix! Jaeger snapped, glancing over his shoulder down the length of the Marauder. The tech-adept emerged from his maintenance alcove, trailing a twist of cabling. 'Talk to one of the missile auspices, find out if it can see anything in that dust cloud.'

Ferix nodded, and ducked through a low hatchway into the maintenance crawl space that led to the starboard wing. His voice arrived in Jaeger's ear direct through the Marauder's internal comm system.

'Initiating activation sequence, aktiva cons sequentia,' the tech-adept intoned, reciting the rites out loud to himself. His voice took on a different timbre as his brain merged with the mechanical workings of the missile, feeling its spirit moving inside him, divorcing him from the world of the flesh. 'Librius machina auroris dei. Contact established with machine spirit of "Flail" missile, designate 14-56. Praise the Machine God. Ignis optika carta mond. Invoking surveyor sweep over target area. Calculating. Calculating. Calculating. Targets present, multiple, unknown designation.'

'Emperor's claws,' cursed Jaeger hotly. Something was inside that canyon, hiding from orbital surveillance. 'Can you be more specific, how many is multiple?'

'Unknown, target acquisition beyond recall capacity,' Ferix replied. His voice lost its distant edge. 'Flight commander, this missile type has a half-kilobrain of memory, capable of storing information on seventy-five separate targets.'

'So there's more than seventy-five possible targets down there?' Jaeger demanded, the clenching sensation in his stomach moving up to his throat. 'More than seventy-five armoured vehicles?'

'That is correct,' came Ferix's dispassionate reply. 'Smaller objects are disregarded.'

'In all that's holy...' came Berhardt's response, who had been listening in, eyes locked to Jaeger's. 'That's enough to cut their supplies... We have to warn the Guard!'

YOU HAVE very specific orders, flight commander,' Kaurl's stern voice told Jaeger over the comms network.
++Proceed with the attack as planned.++

Jaeger glanced at the small display screen just to the left of the control stick. Ferix had re-mapped the wiring of Raptor One so that the artificial eyes of its missiles were directed towards that display. There were one hundred and twenty-three separate signals there now and still rising as they approached the canyon. Jaeger eyed the small blobs of green light with hatred. His two squadrons were enough to seriously dent the enemy force, but it would be risky. Added to that, the captain had specifically ordered him to ignore them.

If the counter-attack was allowed to continue, though, who could tell what damage it would do to the whole war effort? Speed was the basis of the assault, and if it was slowed down by an incursion into its supply lines, the whole invasion might falter. If it faltered, all would be lost as the Noctal used to the time to gather their armies from across the planet. Who could tell if they had more ships in the vicinity, each now warned and powering their way to raise the orbital siege of the alien-held world? And what of the humans below.

The Noctal had been so shocked there had been no time for them to bargain or use them as hostages, but millions of lives could end in torment and death if the Noctal regained the upper hand.

Jaeger felt torn in several directions at once. He had his orders, they were very specific and Captain Kaurl had said as much. If he attacked the enemy column – whatever else happened – he would have to face a court of inquiry for disobeying those orders. Also, this Noctal army was bound to have defences against air attack; after all they had been suffering badly from airstrikes for the last twelve hours. If this counter-attack was as important as Jaeger thought it was, it would have every available protection. And that meant a lot of added risk. Risk to himself, his planes and their crews. Risks Jaeger was loath to take. Had he not, minutes before, been ruing the day he led Raptor squadron on that deadly attack against the ork hulk? And now here he was, contemplating disobeying a direct order to lead his men down a canyon full of the enemy, into Emperor-knew-what kind of trouble and bloodshed. Jaeger swallowed hard and made his decision.

'Raptors, Devils, change of plan,' he announced to his command through gritted teeth. His duty was ultimately to the campaign as a whole, and through that to the Emperor. He had no other course of action open to him. 'Follow me to the enemy, free attack once you are in range.'

++Let's do some huntin'!++ came Gesper's reply from Devil Two.

++Behind you all the way, sir++ agreed Phrao.

'Come in low and fast, hit them with everything you've got, then make for the *Divine Justice*,' Jaeger was talking quickly now, feeling adrenaline surge through him as he banked the squadrons towards the canyon and nosed Raptor One towards the ground. 'No waiting around!'

++Raptor One, this is Storm. We are on intercept course to enemy fighters over new target.++

++Storm One, this is Arrow One, you'll have to get there before me!++

Even as the message ended, Dextra's Thunderbolt screamed across Jaeger's field of vision, its jets at full burn leaving a brief after-image in the flight commander's eyes. It was swiftly followed by the shapes of the other four Thunderbolts, spreading out in readiness for the coming dogfight. As Jaeger continued to bank, Storm squadron roared overhead, just seconds behind the Arrows.

'We'll be at the canyon in twenty-five seconds,' Berhandt reported.

Jaeger nodded and levelled the marauder, pushing up the engines to maximum as Raptor One powered towards the enemy a mere two hundred metres above the softly undulating dunes of Mearopyis.

'Fifteen seconds to canyon,' Berhandt informed him, bent once more over the aiming reticule.

Above him, Jaeger could see the fighters duelling in and out of the rising dust cloud. A moment later and the sand and grit was swirling around the marauder, skittering off the windshield and obscuring everything past a couple of metres.

'I hope those engine filters hold, Ferix,' Jaeger glanced over his shoulder to the tech-addept in the maintenance bay.

'I fitted them myself, flight commander,' Ferix assured him coldly, bringing a smile to Jaeger's lips beneath his air mask.

'Ten seconds to target,' came Berhandt's countdown. 'Nine... Eight... Seven... Six... Five... Four... Three... Two... One... Target acquired!'

Jaeger felt rather than saw the ground drop away beneath him and banked the Marauder to port, heading north, and down into the canyon. Flickers of green las-fire illuminated the dust cloud ahead and to either side, but none was close yet. A hum started in Jaeger's ear as Berhandt locked-on one of the flail missiles, its warning tone rising to a screech as it became aware of its target's location.

'Fly sweet vengeance!' Berhandt spat, pressing down on the firing stud. A half-second later the missile streaked downwards and then levelled, disappearing into the dust on a trail of white fire. Jaeger felt his heart beat once, then again, then there was a bright patch in the storm and a moment later a muffled boom shook the canopy.

'Fuel carrier, I think,' Berhandt commented, not looking up from the sighting array.

The dust began to thin rapidly and soon Jaeger could see the bottom of the canyon, still half a kilometre below. No wonder the orbital augurs didn't notice this, it's as deep as the pits of hell, he thought. Another missile flared off towards the enemy, its vapour trail joined by eight more as the other Marauders opened fire. They jinked and wove as strong eddies in the wind, caused by the funnelling effect of the deep canyon, forced them to adjust their flight path towards their prey. A couple of seconds later nine explosions blossomed in rapid succession in a cluster across the canyon floor, but Jaeger still couldn't make out what they were firing at. Now more ground-fire was lancing its way along the natural trench towards them. Pulses of tracer fire combined with the green las-blasts he'd seen earlier, but the enemy were aiming too high.

Looking away at the target-screen for a moment, he saw a grouping of several dozen stationary vehicles ahead.

'See that cluster?' he asked Berhandt as a shell whistled past a few metres to his left. The bombardier nodded and adjusted a couple of dials on his visor.

'Squadrons, assume formation Bravus for main payload drop,' Jaeger ordered the two squadrons into position to maximise damage from the bombing run. Without warning, he heard a detonation close from behind, and twisting in his pilot's seat he looked out the side window. A Marauder was banking off, flames engulfing its tail and rear fuselage. Its uncontrolled descent took it into the canyon wall a second later, its fuel tanks and plasma

chamber exploding in a shower of flames and debris.

'Who was that? Who did we lose?' Jaeger demanded over the comm.

++Devil Three, Scairn's plane++ came the reply from Cal Logan, the Devil squadron leader.

++Dammit! We've lost two engines!++ Lstin cursed, before Jaeger could answer.

'Raptor Three, get back to orbit!' snapped Jaeger, noticing that las-bolts were streaking down towards them as well as from the ground.

'Arrow, Storm! Strafe enemy positions on the canyon walls!' Jaeger's voice was clipped, harsh, as he focussed his mind on what to do next. 'Raptor squadron continue with bombing runs. Devil Squadron use missiles and lascannons to provide covering fire.'

A series of affirmatives sounded in the flight commander's ear. Jaeger levelled out the Marauder's course to prepare for the bombing run. He couldn't afford to evade the incoming fire, it would make aiming almost impossible for Berhandt. A splintering crack appeared in the canopy between him and the bombardier as a las-bolt ricocheted off. Jaeger heard other impacts rattling along the length of the fuselage as green flashes of laser energy and yellow tracers converged on him, the lead plane.

He knew Ferix was now working at full stretch, monitoring any malfunctions, coaxing Raptor One's own systems into repairing themselves, welding, cutting and binding where that wasn't possible. He could hear the tech-adept chanting liturgies of maintenance and repair behind him. A red warning light flashed on the panel to Jaeger's right – one of the engines was leaking plasma. Without thought, the flight commander shut down power to the damaged jet and boosted up the others, stabilising the Marauder's flight path with small movements on the control stick.

++Raptor Four is down, Raptor Three is down++ reported Phrao heavily. ++Storm and Arrow have broken off, they're out of fuel.++

'Emperor damn it all to hell!' snarled Jaeger, looking back and up over his shoulder for a sign that any enemy fighters had survived the air duel. A sudden blood-curdling shriek over the inter-squadron frequency deafened him, forcing Jaeger to shut down the comm and switch off the

pitiful cry. He adjusted one of the secondary view screens on his panel to display the rear camera shot. Another Marauder was tumbling groundwards, wreathed in smoke and flames, its wings spinning away on separate trajectories trailing burning fuel. His chest tight with apprehension, he opened up the comm-link again.

'Who was that?' he demanded.

'Bombs away!' Berhandt called out, sitting up from where he'd been crouched over the bombsight. Jaeger's head whirled as so many things clamoured for his attention.

++It was Devil One, sir++ came Phrao's delayed reply.

Jaeger closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath, steadying himself. Opening them again, he looked at the rear view to see massive red flames bursting over the dark shapes of the enemy attack column. The fireballs continued to expand, the special incendiaries igniting the air itself with their heat, filling the canyon from wall to wall with crackling, hungry flame.

Another massive detonation followed, and then another as the other Marauders dropped their devastating payloads. Jaeger saw secondary explosions along the ground as fuel tanks expanded and burst and ammunition was set on fire. Another blossom of brighter fire, in the air this time, showed where a tailing Noctal fighter had flown straight into the inferno as it had attempted to close from below.

Berhandt was firing off the remaining missiles, as were the other Marauders. In front and behind, the canyon was a blaze of destruction. Burning wrecks littered the valley floor, while the firebombs damage continued to creep along the walls and into the air, slowing now, billowing black smoke now rising thousands of metres into the clouds.

'That should give the ships in orbit something to aim at, if nothing else,' Berhandt commented gruffly, switching his attention to the lascannon controls.

Jaeger spied a group of vehicles along the east wall and banked the Marauder smoothly towards them. More ground fire sprung up to meet them, sporadic at first but building in intensity until once more Raptor One was banging and clattering with impacts, and the air became iridescent with multiple las-blasts impacting into her thick armour.

'Just another couple of seconds,' Berhardt told him, and Jaeger could hear the grind and whirr of motors as the multi-barrelled anti-tank gun swivelled in its nose mount. A movement to Jaeger's right attracted the flight commander's attention and he look across, flicking his gaze between this distraction and the approaching canyon wall. It was a bright spark of blue, growing bigger very quickly. With a start, Jaeger realised it was an incoming missile.

'Oh s...' Jaeger's curse was cut off by an explosion just to his right and behind him. He heard Marte bellow in pain and Raptor One dipped suddenly to starboard, smashing Berhardt's head against his sighting array.

'We've lost the whole wing!' screamed one of his crew, the panicked wail making their voice unrecognisable.

'Into the saviour pod!' shouted Jaeger, punching free of his harness, and releasing the dazed Berhardt as the Marauder's erratic lurch tumbled him across the bombardier's chair. He could feel Raptor One plummeting down nose first and had to almost crawl his way up the fuselage. Ferix was there, ushering the others into the armoured compartment, and he saw Marte being bundled in by Arick, the old veteran's flight suit ripped to shreds, blood pumping from half a dozen shrapnel wounds in his chest.

Pushing Ferix and Berhardt in first, Jaeger grabbed the door. As he swung it shut he saw the ground screaming up towards him through the canopy. A las-bolt shattered the front screen and the wind howled in, almost wrenching the door from his grasp. With a wordless, bestial snarl he grasped the handle with both hands and slammed it shut.

'Strap in, sir!' Arick pointed towards the empty seat.

'No time,' Jaeger replied, punching his fist into the release button. Explosive bolts ignited around the base of the pod, hurling it outwards from the doomed wreck of Raptor One. As it tumbled in flight, Jaeger was thrown onto the wall then the ceiling, before the pod steadied on its retro jets and he fell to the floor, dazed, his leg twisted, sending flares of pain up his spine.

'Are you...?' Arick began to ask, but red filled Jaeger's vision and he heard rather than felt his head thump against the floor. The sound of his blood rushing through his ears filled his mind before unconsciousness swept through him.

JAEGER OPENED his eyes and winced as sunlight blinded him. He was sat with his back to the saviour pod, out in the Mearopyis desert somewhere. Ferix was changing the bandages wrapped around Marte's chest, while Jaeger's own numb right leg was splinted, so he guessed it was broken. Arick noticed he was awake, and the young man crouched down in front of him, face solemn.

'Raptor One, there's nothing left of her.' The youthful gunner was almost in tears.

Jaeger gulped and gathered his thoughts. He pushed himself to his feet, wincing at the pain in his leg, and looked around. Just on the horizon was a massive plume of dust.

'Don't worry, it's the Guard advancing on the capital,' Arick reassured him.

'Other... other losses?' Jaeger asked quietly, keeping his eyes on Arick's.

'Two thirds of the Marauders are destroyed,' Arick's reply was hoarse, and this time there really was a glint of moisture in his eyes. 'Half the Thunderbolts. Seven pilots dead. Losark won't be getting any more kills, I'm afraid. Thirty-three other crewmembers dead. Fourteen wounded, including Marte who has shrapnel lodged in his spine, and you.'

'So, almost the entirety of the *Divine Justice*'s flight complement destroyed,' sighed Jaeger bitterly. 'Was it worth it, Arick?'

'I think so, sir. You saved thousands of lives, by my reckoning,' Arick replied with a fleeting grin.

'I doubt the Imperial Navy will see it that way,' Jaeger answered with a heavy heart, already picturing his court martial. He sat down again and rested his chin against his chest for a moment, eyes closed against the harsh light. With another sigh he looked up at Arick, into his fresh, grey eyes. 'They'll hang me for this disaster.'

He gazed out at the distant army, rumbling towards the enemy capital, intent on recapturing this world. Was it worth it, Jaeger asked himself? He honestly didn't know.



INQUISITOR ASCENDANT

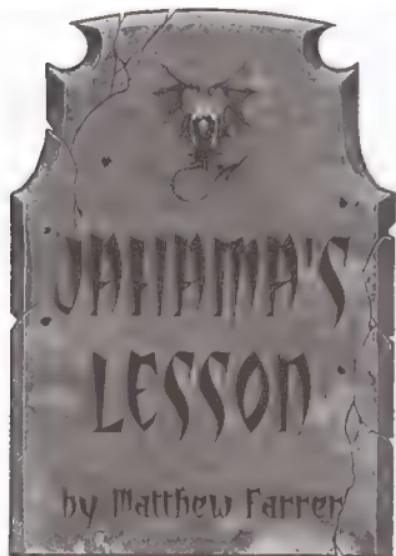


of tal action packed world. X-men fight the imperial world of Niedernau and Inquistor is fed his vast appetites. Xavier is despatched to investigate his cult. Headed by Sartan, the delectable cardinal, the two reporters race about dispensing the Empire's divine retributions.

X-Men: Magik) and Simon Coleby







SOMETHING HAD arrived on the shores of Bretonnia, a chill shadow that slipped into the Bay of Hawks under an empty night sky and through a still, quiet ocean mist. It was a thick, unseasonable fog that lay across the shore like a blanket of some parasitic mould, drowning the shingle beach and tangling itself in the trees beyond. On another night it would have had poachers or late-night fishermen muttering uneasily, but tonight the moon was in and nothing moved in the dimness. Out to sea it narrowed sharply to a spot in the centre of the bay: a spire of black rock, glistening like a rotted tooth, spearing into the air between the headlands. The spire had not been there at sundown.

Khreos Maledict, Lord of Karond Kar, master of the Black Ark *Exultation of Blighted Hope*, chuckled over the sound of lapping water and tugged at the cloak about his armoured shoulders. The night had been mild as they had sailed into the bay, but the sorcerous fog had brought a chill to the air.

'I confess I have often thought our sorcerers' interest in weather weaving and concealment foolish and effete, but I profess myself newly educated. Even lacking the skills of our soft-spined southern cousins, I can see how the techniques Skail and his apprentices were

fretting over could be... profitable. I have never seen the *Exultation*'s walls of mist extended so far from her, or so thick.'

He peered about him, trying to see the hills over the curve of the bay, but they were as smothered by the fog as the shape of the Black Ark behind them. The young helldrake towing the landing-skiff was invisible in the whiteness ahead, although every so often he thought he could hear a crack or chink as the Drakemasters goaded their charge one way or another. Even the lines of his coach, almost close enough to touch, were grey and dreamlike, and the four dark riders behind it made ghost-shapes as their horses pawed at the skiff's broad deck. Khreos shot a look at the young elf next to him.

'You, nephew, are clearly still not convinced of this whole exercise. No matter. Truth to tell, Khrat, I do not believe you will be convinced until you stand at the foregate of the *Exultation* and watch the, eh, what's the creature purporting to rule this piece of the land?'

'The Duc d'Argent,' put in a pale shape from the gloom at the front of the skiff.

'Watch the Duc d'Argent being towed aboard by the witch elf hooks in his flesh. What do you think, Miharan? Gilded chains for the baron and his family, in honour of their station?'

Miharan Diamo, the diminutive witch elf elder, the one they called the Scorpion's Daughter, would not return his smile.

'Make sure your reach does not exceed your grasp, Lord Khreos. You have not yet made your cut – you are only just drawing the knife.' She gave a dismissive gesture of her hand. 'But when the Castille d'Argent has fallen, I will commission your gilded chains happily enough.'

Khreos kept his smile in place and made a polite bow of acknowledgement, as he narrowed his eyes and promised himself yet another time that the little albino bitch would be meeting with an accident as soon as he could find a foolproof way to arrange one. Ahead of them splashing sounds came through the fog as the helldrake gained shallow water and was made to pull the skiff aground. The little vessel juddered as its bow was hinged down into a ramp, and Khreos and Khrat climbed carefully into the coach as Miharan stepped in on the

other side. There was the sound of hooves and they were off, jolting up the beach until they reached the road into the hills, the Dark Riders taking up position around them as they emerged from the fog.

'Perfect,' declared Khereos, sitting back and smiling again. 'See, nephew? I told you the coach would cross the beach with no trouble. I selected this bay for its shingle as well as its roadway.' His nephew did not reply, and Khereos's gaze switched to the fourth figure in the coach, a silent patch of black against the wine-and-gold colours of the seats.

'And you, Jahama, you are to be the knife we draw tonight, the core and pivot of my stratagem.' He leaned forward to the figure – but not too close. He had heard stories about the assassins who emerged from all those years under the witch elves' tutelage, and of what happened to those who got too trusting toward them. 'Miharan has sung your praises, sir. I don't doubt that when we ride upon the Castille d'Argent tomorrow we shall find you greeting us at the gate, knife-blade wet, eh?'

'I understand my orders, lord.' The assassin spoke well enough but his voice was oddly soft and flat, as if reciting unfamiliar words by rote. He would not meet Khereos's eyes.

'You'd best leave him, Lord Maledict. He has a hard night ahead of him, and he must prepare himself.' Khereos snorted at the sound of Miharan's voice, making less effort to hide his displeasure now, and sat back to watch the trees shadowing out the stars over the road. The road was entering woods and the sounds of hoofbeats slowed as the coach-horses moved onto rougher road and the Dark Riders began weaving in and out through the trees, watchful for movement in the dark around them. There was something oppressive about the evening and for a time the only sounds were hooves and the wind until the coach slowed and they heard the driver's voice murmuring through the little window:

'Lord, we are at the place. Beyond here the patrols from the Castille begin.'

With what Khereos considered unseemly haste, Miharan flicked open the coach door and vaulted easily out of the howdah and down to the ground, Jahama a moment

behind her. But when Khereit went to lower the little folding steps and follow them Khereos put a hand on his shoulder.

'Don't look so puzzled, nephew. Just bide your time. We wait for the Lady Miharan to kiss her throat-cutter goodbye and come back aboard, then we return to the *Exultation*. In the meantime, try turning your wits to what we're actually about here.' His eyes turned to the two shapes outside in the clearing. 'Let's see if you can realise what I have planned.'



ON THE GROUND below them, Jahama shrugged his shoulders and adjusted the hang of his cloak. His hands flickered pale in the dimness as he tested the draw on each of his weapons.

'You need no final advice, Jahama. Remember only what it is you have to achieve. I will greet you again on the Black Ark.' Miharan gave a small tilt of her head, and Jahama swept back into a deep kneeling bow. The witch elf placed her hand on his head. Then they both straightened and stepped apart.

As Jahama scanned the hills and got his bearings Miharan leapt lightly onto the running board and slipped into the coach. He ignored the sound of its wheeling and moving away, but one of the Dark Riders paused long enough to look down at Jahama with an odd expression. Jahama met the other elf's gaze for a chilly moment before the Rider wheeled his mount and disappeared after the rest of the party. His face still expressionless, Jahama looked around the clearing again.

The stiff wind blew at ground level too, crumpling the treetops and sending gusts between the trunks. Night-eyed as he was, Jahama had to crouch in the shelter between two thick roots and strike one of the little tapers the assassins used, designed to burn for just a moment and to be easily shielded with a cupped hand. It showed him the piece of yellow parchment, the one with the forest, the road, the little river-bridge, the village, and the Castille d'Argent on its hill. In the seconds it took

for the taper to burn down and extinguish he had fitted the map to the clearing he stood in, tucking it into his belt he could turn and look into the night in the direction he now knew the castle lay.

'I understand my orders, lord,' he said again, and now his voice was full of a soft, easy amusement. His cloak sat warm and close about his shoulders as he began a gentle jog away through the woods to the killing ground.



SEATED IN THE coach, Khrait Maledict sprawled his legs out in a finely calculated pose of carelessness and listened to the sparring between his uncle and the Scorpion's Daughter. He hooded his eyes and tilted his helm forward a little to obscure where his gaze was resting, and idly rested his head on his hand in such as way that he could grin without it showing. This was interesting.

'And so, my Bride of Khaine, was your assassin ready? Had he prepared himself adequately? He needed no further tutelage from you?' The lord's tone was heavy and bantering, more so than it would normally have been. Dark elves, particularly their nobility, never conversed – the most trifling exchange of words was always a subtle, studied contest of insult and counter-insult as each tried to saw away at the other's composure. Khrait knew it irritated his uncle that the game didn't seem to work with witch elves, whose manners tended to the simple and brutal. Mihran didn't seem to have the wit to feel the barbs that Khaeos had constantly thrown at her on the *Exultation*'s voyage out – but that fact nettled the lord so intensely that Khrait couldn't believe it wasn't a deliberate gambit by Mihran herself. He wondered why his uncle hadn't picked that up. Perhaps the old fool really was starting to lose his edge.

'He is the equal of the task you have set him and more, my Lord Maledict. When you came to me at Naggarond, you demanded the finest assassin under my tutelage. I promised I would provide no less. I was sent for that night and told to

bring Jahama to your docks. My finest pupil. I could hardly have sent anyone less.'

'You do credit to yourself, Daughter of the Scorpion,' said the lord. 'Your reputation, your skills as a tutor...' Mihran waved a hand airily as the coach bounced over a rough spot. They were moving faster now, the driver more sure of himself and their cargo delivered.

'It takes a certain eye, lord, and the providence of Khaine. I took Jahama personally, of course. A small manse over Karond Kar harbour. I understand they were master shipwrights of some kind.' She shrugged. 'Their blood was as red as anyone else's.'

Khrait suppressed a shudder. He had wondered, as had everyone he knew when they were young, whether the eyes of the witch elves would ever fall on him. How could they not when sometimes on the dazed, shattered morning after Death Night houses were found with the families and retainers butchered, even the animals cut apart, but the children not dead but simply gone? And then years later, as an army drew up for battle, one might hear among the witch elves' battle-cries the particular voice of a girl not heard since childhood, or move to let an assassin take his place among the soldiers and glimpse for half a second under a cowl the features of a playmate vanished a quarter of a lifetime before...

Jahama had seemed about his own age. Khrait shuddered again and wondered if the assassin would have been someone he would have grown up to know.



THE WIND HAD been Jahama's friend. It gusted and eddied and stung the skin in a way that reminded him of the training grounds outside Ghond. And it would also break up his scent and stop more than a scrap of it reaching the giant hunting-hounds that seemed to be tethered outside every farmer's cottage he passed. He had rubbed his tunic and plastered his hair with the oil that Bretonnians used on their leather jerkins and tack, and that confused

them further: he had triggered nothing more than the occasional puzzled, hesitant bark. Had this been Naggaroth, these ones would have been dead in their sleep at their own brothers' hands five times over, with guards that soft.

Deep night though it was, the countryside was not as deserted as the bay and forest had been. Not long after the road left the forest for farmland he had come up behind a pair of wagons pulled by great slab-muscled horses, decked with lanterns and with men-at-arms jogging beside them. Whatever was urgent enough to have such a cavalcade out at night Jahama did not try to guess, but they created a useful commotion, setting dogs barking and flocks of geese honking and making the farmers more likely to ignore them. He had shadowed them for the time it took to pass by the village, then peeled off and flitted away through the vineyards.



DOUBTLESS JAHAMA has profited by his... change in circumstances.' Khereos said silkily. 'Quite an upbringing! A life among the Brides of Khaine – stepchild of the Lord of Murder, as it were. A respectable lineage, even by proxy. And to have excelled in the deadly arts as he has... If, of course, you have described his abilities properly.'

'You seem satisfied enough with my claims about Jahama's capabilities, my lord. You accepted him to be your agent tonight, after all.' Khrat smirked at the lord's questioning of her truthfulness being elegantly turned on its head. If Khereos doubted her confidence in Jahama, she was saying, then to have picked him anyway for this mission was doubly foolish. Oh, she was sharp. No drug-addled beast-woman, this one.

Lord Khereos, glowering, shifted tack.

'The Shades I sent to spy out the land were unable to approach the castle, you know. The peasants are loyal and tenacious. They keep vigils of their own at night, with dogs and wardens, and are quick to answer an alarm from the castle walls – why, you

saw for yourself that we could not go even halfway through the forest before we had to leave Jahama to go on by himself. This is a troubled part of the coast, you see, and its people are well prepared. Two of my Shades tracked a warband of Gor that came out of the swamps to the south and into the Duc d'Argent's lands, and the Duc's response was well marshalled indeed. If he should make it to the castle, he had best be careful when he flees it. I expect the yeomen will be combing the countryside for him. Perhaps we should have warned him that our last three spies were all captured.'

Miharan's face betrayed nothing.

'I would not concern yourself. Jahama was sent last year beyond the Watchtowers and into the east where the Chaos tribes wander. His mission was to poison the wells of a tribe that had been harrying our border. The land was alive with roving warbands – there was some great strife between the Marauder chieftains that had them hunting each other and everything else they found – but Jahama slipped by them all. None found him. Watchful or no, the Bretonnians will not find him either.'



AROUND THE VILLAGE Jahama began to see the wardens and slowed his pace.

In country like this the Duc's patrols would be no idle night-wanderers, podgy with the bribes they took from the poachers they were supposed to catch. The first he found were on a little footbridge near the village mill, three men in Ducal livery leaning on the bridge wall with a brazier between them. Jahama did not think of taking chances; he moved in a wide semicircle around them and soon found their two companions. Two more yeomen in a grove thirty paces from the bridge, dark capes over their surcoats, easy to overlook if an intruder were intent on the lanterns and conversation of the guards around their little fire. Safely out of reach of their inferior human night-vision Jahama eyed them balefully, fighting down the urge to put a blowpipe dart into each of them. Sentries who knew enough to set up a twofold

guard like this would also know enough to keep regular contact with each other, and the instant anyone found any of these men gone there would be an alarm raised. It was not the time for that yet.

It took him ten minutes to circle about them, triple-checking every bush and shadow for a third hidden watcher. There were none. Jahama shrugged out of his cloak and bundled the thick material into a parchment-thin hide envelope – wet, it would cling to him and weigh him down. Then he slipped into the water and darted eel-quick across to the far bank, pulling his cloak about him again as he listened intently. His breathing had not quickened; his face showed nothing but quiet concentration. There were fresh horse tracks on this side of the river, meaning night-time patrols, but he could hear no hooves and so he began to move again. The hillside below the Duc's castle was bare and he was grateful for the lack of moonlight: invisible in the dark, he looked up at the black bulk of the castle and grinned.



'I AM PLEASED to hear it,' declared Khereos. 'The quieter and more skilled he is, the greater his chances of catching the Duc in his bed. The advantage of surprise would be crucial, I imagine. The Duc has something of a reputation as an opponent. Were he to face Kouran of Naggarond himself, I might still hedge my bets.' Khereos kept his voice carefully casual. 'My spies' accounts of his battles against the bestigor war-chief were really quite chilling to read, and he has by all accounts bested vampires, trolls, greenskins of all –'

'Jahama is unmatched at all the assassin's arts. As I told you.' Miharan cut him off, sounding impatient – or was it defensiveness? Miharan's expression was still unreadable above the fur she had wrapped around herself, but Khrait thought he was going to give his uncle this one on points – she seemed rattled.

'I hope for his sake he is.' They were back on shingle again and Khrait realised with mild surprise that they were back at the bay

– they had been moving faster than he had realised. Next to him, his uncle was letting his smugness show. Jahama will not have the assassin's usual advantage for too long. There will only be a few soldiers he will be able to take by surprise; the rest he must fight while looking them in the eye, and with no others to support him. Or not for many hours, at least. I know he can pounce like a cat, but should he have to fight the Duc toe-to-toe, blade against blade... well, we must have hope, eh?

The lord cocked a triumphant eyebrow. Miharan's gaze was stone.



GUILLAUME SHIFTED from foot to foot and eyed the brand guttering in the bracket above him. From the castle rampart he could just hear the singing and the banging of goblets on tables from the feasting hall. Jacqueline would be in there, he supposed, carrying the big jugs of coarse red wine back and forth. If he hadn't been bullied into taking Marcel's watch tonight he could have worked his way in, and he was sure that tonight he would finally have found the courage to talk to her. His grandmother in the village had told him that the west wind knew all about love, if you said the name of the one you loved just as you held a burning torch up high and watched the sparks...

He looked about again, didn't see anyone, switched the halberd to his left hand and started trying to wrestle the torch out of its bracket. If the sparks blew straight, it meant your love would be returned, but if they corkscrewed in the wind... Guillaume frowned. He must have strained a muscle or something – there was a sharp pain in his neck. And then his legs crumpled under him.

Jahama fielded the halberd before it could clatter on the stones and slid his stiletto free of Guillaume's body, then took a deep breath of chilly air. The moment in a mission when there was no more need for secrecy and he was free to kill was always the most delicious one. He flicked the blood from his knife, selected a broader, heavier blade for his other hand and looked around.

The wooden roof inside the gatehouse, that would be the stables. Important work: a little poison dust scattered there and any surviving knights would be without mounts come the dawn. That tower to the left: he knew that was the quarters of Sir Roland, the Duc's adjutant, and of Jules the Rash and the brat pack of knights-errant that he led. Important men. That should be his next stop after the stables, to deal with any who had retired early and then lie in wait for the rest as they came in, rolling on their feet and flushed with drink. The gatehouse itself, of course, must not be overlooked: there would be the capstans and counterweights for the drawbridge and portcullis, to make sure that the Lord Maledict could march straight into the courtyard upon his arrival.

Hours until dawn, but not that many. Jahama looked up and down the wall, saw no other sentries, then went leaping down the stairs and through the shadows, away from the gatehouse and stables and straight past Sir Roland's tower to the servants' quarters.



THE EXULTATION was nothing like the quiet bulk against the stars that it had been when the skiff and its coach had left. Now the lower reaches of the Ark were strung with lamps, and the air rang with shouts and splashes as boat after boat was lowered to the water and dark elves thronged at the docks to board them. Cold ones were being hooded and shoved into longboat corrals and bundles of crossbow-bolts passed from shoulder to shoulder from the armouries. Lord Khreos surveyed the activity and gave his nephew an indulgent smile as their own skiff was hoisted from the water.

'Nearly time now, Khrat. You are already in armour, of course, and our mounts are prepared. We will move straight to begin our march. Enough bickering over our little assassin friend, eh, Miharan? We shall find out if he has done his work soon enough.' The Lord laughed, and Khrat could tell he considered the

argument with Miharan over, but the little elf was talking again.

'A pity our trip ended so soon. I had hoped to have time to tell you another story of Jahama before we marched. The manner in which he was made a full assassin is not known to many outside our cult, but the tale is a good one.' She stretched inside her fur cloak, indifferent to the way the skiff hung fifty feet over the *Exultation's* marshalling yards.

The year Jahama reached his final training the winter was bitter and the stars in a vile alignment, and Hellebron was in an ill humour. Decreeing a special test for the assassins, she stationed her own master assassin Hakoer beside her, the one they called the Breath of Ice for his coldness.'

'No one I have ever heard of,' Khreos was inspecting the back of his gauntlet, feigning indifference.

'Oh, you will have heard of him, my lord. All Naggaroth has heard of him, simply not his name.' Miharan allowed herself a smile as the implication sank in. The air turned grey as the Ark's shield of enchanted fog swirled around them.

Jahama was barely six-score years and scrawny with youth. No one else would be his patron, but I knew I had found a quality in the boy. The test was simple. Hellebron locked her palace. Her best artisans set their traps in every room, her own assassins and her guards hunted through her tower with orders to strike down any elf they did not know as one of their own. And to Hakoer she handed her own blade, the Deathsword, to use on any that approached them.

'All they had to do, you see, was make their way to Hellebron's audience chamber, and pluck from Hakoer's neck his silver collar with its single ruby. Then Hellebron would declare it a gift to them and we would have our newly anointed assassin. She laughed as she told us that she would see the hearts of our pupils on Khaine's altar by the next sunrise, and that if any got close enough even to set eyes on Hakoer's silver collar she would reward his trainer richly.'

The skiff came to a gentle landing on its rest, and servants hurried to roll a ramp into place. Dotted with baleful lamplights, the Black Ark's spires skewered the night sky around them.

'But I have wasted time, lord, I apologise. I am sure you have better things to do than listen to old tales of a simple functionary of yours.'

Miharan walked past the two nobles, ignoring their glares, and stepped lightly down to the deck where her handmaidens waited. The lord watched her for a moment, then shrugged her off and turned back to his nephew.

'Well now, Khrat. If you ever wish to take a place in the great hall of House Maledict I trust you have learned from what you saw tonight. We could have followed the urgings of your infantile friends, marched ashore from the *Exultation* as soon as we came to the bay and tried to smash our way inland. Within a day we would have been surrounded by those ham-handed human knights and brought to battle. By the time we had felled them, what then? Our energy dissipated in barbarous hacking-matches with a foe beneath our dignity.'

Attend! See the way that the edge, the steel, the very spear-point of our army is assembling and moving to shore. Our cold ones are waiting, our retainers and lieutenants. But as we advance through the night, as we move like armoured shadows along the road, our first strike will come sooner still! Like the tongue flicking out ahead of the snake, Jahama is stealing ahead of us. Like the night wind he will pass into the baron's fortress and descend upon the sleeping knights like Khaine himself Blade and venom throughout the halls and walls and chambers! Khrat, leaning insolently against the rail, rolled his eyes - his uncle's penchant for melodrama had slipped its reins again.

'Tomorrow when we reach the castle, there will be nothing! A gutted husk, its gates standing open before us, its knights lying naked in their beds, their throats open, the watchmen struck down in their towers with never an alarm sounded! And then - attend, nephew - then we shall turn to the countryside at large, to the farms and villages. Then the slavers will bring out their shackles and whips, then the cold ones can gorge, then we shall have our hunts and our fights. And those animals will scurry and cry "where are our

knights, where is our Duc?" but their defenders will have been cut from the tale before it begins! By the time messengers can reach any other castles, the *Exultation* of Blighted Hopes will be sailing for Karond Kar, and our holds shall groan with slaves!'

'The crashing invasions and battles that you youngbloods seem to favour are well enough in their way. But save them for those repugnant little inbreeds on Ulthuan! Why waste warriors against these sweaty, hairy savages? Brute force is one thing, Khrat, but this is House Maledict. And a plan like this has...' he matched the words to the closing of a fist, '...elegance.'



THREE HUMANS in the little cobbled yard around the well: a pair of servants drawing water and a valet relieving himself against the wall. Running and leaping, Jahama passed over the well and between the two servants who dropped without ever seeing the blades that had cut them. A twist in mid-air and he rolled into a lunging double thrust that caught the valet in sternum and throat as he turned. The man fell with his hands still tangled in his breeches and Jahama was away.

Light and noise emanated from the windows of the servants' hall, and Jahama flicked the stiletto back into his sleeve and grabbed a little wooden stool sitting by a wall. A sweep of a long arm sent it crashing through the shutters and the first of them came milling out of the door a moment later, silhouetted sharp against the firelight. Jahama could have dropped five of them in as many heartbeats with throwing-blades, but he was already bounding up the steps to the walkway that led to the Grail chapel. Its heavy doors stood ajar, throwing out candlelight, and two figures stood outside them, hands on sword-hilts. One grey head, one blond. Harsh human syllables grated on Jahama's ears.

'An argument or something. It's the servants. Shall we finish our prayers, father?'

They peered out, eyes adjusting to the gloom. The old one was no threat, but the young one would be one of the Duc's warriors. There was power in his frame and he held his sword with casual ease.

He ran at them and pirouetted by the young knight to take his father with a low, flat backhanded stroke. The old knight fell to his knees, wheezing in agony and as the son turned to try to swing Jahama made a dainty slash just above his eyes. The cut was shallow but the flow of blood was blinding. The knight staggered, wiping his face with one hand and roaring as Jahama neatly finished his pirouette, leapt straight up and swung onto the chapel roof.

He must have knocked over a lantern in the servants' quarters; the firelight was much brighter and people were running with shouts and wet sacks. One or two had even come to the door of the main hall where horns and loud singing were still blaring. In front of the chapel, the young knight was screaming. Jahama knew enough Bretonnian to catch 'Father!' and 'Murderer!' before he slipped a noose over a roof-gable and slid down the thin cord to the cobbles on the far side.

A boy was peering out of a high window at the commotion, and Jahama took the opportunity to flick a throwing-needle up and into him. The motion caught the eye of someone at the servants' hall – the fire was all but out but the crowd was growing – and at the first shout of 'Who goes there?' Jahama was running again, flitting sparrow-quick past the open door to the feasting hall with his blowpipe rising to his lips.

'Marius?' from behind him, then, more urgently, 'Marius? Marius!' In motions so practised they were unconscious, his left hand stowed his blowpipe back at his thigh and re-drew his cleaving knife. His other sheathed the stiletto and tugged the cord that opened a pack at his hip and sent a dozen small steel caltrops tinkling onto the steps behind him. The man at the hall's entrance had dragged his crumpled companion away and now more figures were pouring out, from the hall and the tower, and shouts were going around the

walls. Jahama grinned, now things would begin in earnest.



FOR THE FIRST time since the skiff had set off from the Ark, Khrat spoke aloud.

'The assassin was expensive to procure, uncle. And his success – he shot a look over his shoulder, but Miharan had passed out of earshot – his success will bring kudos and rewards to the witch elves at the expense of ourselves. All things considered, uncle, is it really wise to hand Morathi and her followers a gift like this? All that anyone will know when those two return is that House Maledict are so under Miharan's thumb that we're freighting a load of slaves back for her free.'

Khreos turned to look at his nephew as they sauntered down the ramp to the Ark's lower keep. Scorn, smugness and exasperation fought for position in the curl of his lip and the arch of his eyebrows.

'Return? Return with us? Don't be stupid, boy.'



THREE WAS A howl behind him: someone rousted out of bed had been the first to cross the caltrops and hadn't put on his boots. Jahama laughed loudly for a few moments to give them his location then hurled himself down the cloister alongside the hall and through the first door he found.

A stifling kitchen, cooks banking the coals in the roasting-pits now that the feast was finally done. Good. Jahama's arm described a curt quarter-circle and two fell back with slivers of steel in their necks, then he vaulted a chopping-block, plucked the cleaver from it and drove it into a serving-man's shoulder. Almost without thought his fingers picked a loose-weave sachet of Tuern's Curse – one of the few poisons he had bothered to bring – and tossed it into the stewpot as a surprise for

them later, then he turned as the knights poured in behind him.

All were unarmoured, but all were armed: a dozen drawn swords and perhaps half that many axes and maces. All weapons needing a wind-up and space to swing. If he could get in among them, getting back out to the courtyard would be an easier matter.

They were rushing at him, the young one he'd cut in front of the chapel in the lead wearing a mask of blood and tears. Jahama took a moment to wonder how he looked to them – a head taller than they but slender even with his cloak and cowl about him, narrow-faced and steel-eyed even by Naggarothi standards. The dying fires seemed to give everything a lushness, a depth, and turned his assassin's cloak into a pit that drank the light. Then Jahama stopped thinking, gave a nonchalant flick of his arm that threw a line over a roofbeam, and swung neatly up over their heads.

They were quicker than he expected and a sword-point caught the hem of his cloak, but it was too light a touch to slow him and he somersaulted in the air to land lightly behind the men who had run at him. Someone cannoned into him and for a moment he almost lost his balance, but it was no real difficulty to turn and trap the man's leg just so. The knight's knee snapped as he fell forward into the others. Jahama whipped the edge of his hand expertly into the next man's jaw, sending him choking as another bared his teeth and swung a mace. In the second it took the assassin to shift his balance inside the swing the haft had caught him above the ear and with a snarl to match his attacker's Jahama arced his knife up and lunged. His reflex was to take out the man's throat before he could balance for another swing until he remembered what he was here for, just in time to reverse the stroke and smash the weighted pommel into the man's temple. He would live.

Jahama placed his hands on the staggering knight's shoulders as though he were about to deliver a double-cheek Bretonnian kiss of comradeship, then he spun the man about, pushed off and drove both his feet into the face of the first of the squires to come running through the far door. The boy went down unconscious or dead and Jahama turned the movement

into a backward roll, swiped a knife through the hamstrings of the second squire and ran through into the great hall.

Almost empty, now, a handful of cowering servants the only ones left. A great bestigor head leered from the wall and captured banners hung from the ceiling. Jahama thought of looking for any he recognised but there was no time. Horns were blowing outside, and the counterpoint of booted feet was everywhere. The knights were on his heels again, far too many to fight now – Jahama was starting to think he had done his work a little too well.



DO YOU THINK she knows we've sent her star pupil on a suicide mission, uncle?

'Knows? I don't see how she can. She's too sure of the massacre her pet is preparing to deal out, for all the taunting I gave her.' Forgetting his dignity, Khreos spat on the deck. 'Oh, he'll do his share of damage, I don't doubt. That's why I sent him on ahead to begin with. We'll march into the Duc's lands in a few hours and find the castle boiling like ants' nest that someone has kicked. But you've read the reports of the Duc and his men. One elf destroy them single-handedly? Even one elf whose smug little mistress loves to spin such stories about him? Hellebron's challenge, indeed! Have you ever heard of that Hakoer fellow? Of course not!

'My speech about Jahama emptying out the castle was for Miharan's benefit, Khrait. If you believe it you're as gullible as she – Jahama will never leave that castle alive. Shadowblade himself would be lucky to silence the Duc's entire household. Think about it, Khrait. If one assassin were able to achieve that, or even a dozen, why are there any knights left in Bretonnia at all? He'll never kill them all, certainly not the Duc himself. From what I know of our human friend I think he'll swat Jahama like a gnat when they face off. Face off they will, of course, since that's what I had Miharan tell him to do. But Jahama will kill enough of them for the Duc to be preoccupied with

lamenting his comrades, not watching for more attackers. We arranged for our spies to be captured to teach the Duc that dark elves only ever sneak into his lands alone. Just as he's writing off this as another solitary intruder, albeit a more vicious one – there we shall be!

The lord's steward was standing nearby with a golden tray. They watched carefully as the aged elf had a mouthful of wine from each goblet before they picked them up.

'What will Miharan do when she realises?'

'Oh, I hope she tries to avenge him, Khrait.' Khreos chuckled as he swaggered away. 'Oh, I hope she does.'

Khrait took a last swallow of wine as he watched his uncle go. But even as he was dismissing his uncle's vainglory and walking away to prepare for the march, his thoughts turned back to his last sight of Jahama's cloak parting as the assassin had bent to step out of the coach, and the gleam he had seen at the assassin's neck: a collar of dull silver plates with a single deep red jewel.



ASSASSIN! The voice filled the room and seemed to thrum in the stones.

Standing on one of the long trestle tables, Jahama turned and stared. In the doorway, almost filling it, his knights assembled behind him, the man he had been sent here for. The Duc, his iron-grey hair flowed to his shoulders and his greatsword looked like a rapier in his hands. His scarlet and white tunic caught the torchlight.

'Only vermin stab and flee in the night. Can you not fight a knight of the Lady, you that hide in the shadows and murder children and old men? Let me look you in the eye. Do yourself one service in your degenerate life: die a proper death.'

The man had taken a step into the room and the knights were spreading out around him, watchful but not attacking. Jahama realised they were waiting for the duel between their lord and their invader.

The Duc had taken up a fighting stance. His bare arms were heavy with muscle: to an eye used to slender elf limbs he seemed to vibrate with power. Jahama's knives felt like sticks in his hands, felt like nothing. He took a deep breath.

Voices in his memory. *The Lord: you are to be the knife we draw tonight, the core and pivot of my stratagem. Lady Miharan: Remember only what it is you have to achieve.* He took a deep breath.

Then he swept his arm in a single, careful throw that drove his last throwing-blade through the heart of one of the damsels huddling by the fire, gave the Duc his most winning smile and polite bow, and was gone into the courtyard.



TWO MEN-AT-ARMS ran to block him. Jahama flew by them without seeming to slow or even to strike until one after another they dropped to the cobbles. Everywhere he looked in the courtyard there were soldiers closing about him, he fixed his eyes on the gate and opened his stride to the longest. For one agonising moment he thought he would have to climb back to the parapet and back down the line he had cast to scale the walls, but then he saw the little gatehouse door. Instinct made him swerve and jag as he ran at it, and the archers on the walls sent their arrows down to crack against the cobbles. Then the bar to the little inset gate clattered to the ground behind him – one last move to make. He worked it loose from his belt and dropped it just where they would run in pursuit of him. Then he ran, swerved, and made a long dive that carried him almost to the far edge of the moat. A single stroke and he was surging up the far bank, a shadow among shadows even as the first rumours of dawn began to touch the eastern sky.

I have put my neck down across the block and lifted it away clean, he thought. The wind now gone, he heard voices behind him from the gate and allowed himself a single backward look. He could just make out one man peering after him and another standing hunched over, staring at

something on the ground. The little waterproof pouch with the parchment map inside. Jahama laughed then, almost doubling over before he heard the horns behind him and sped up again. He thought they would have better things to do than hunt him now.



IT WOULD BE dawn very soon. Khreos did not like to admit it, but he was finding these lands less detestable than he used to. The sunlight that had scorched his white skin intolerably when he was younger now brought a not unpleasant glow to old bones that felt older in the Naggaroth winter. He put the thought from his mind and hefted his lance – he hated the way he never seemed to be able to concentrate when they were due for battle.

He turned in the saddle, settling into the swaying gait of his cold one, and looked around him; there behind the ranks of his personal guard, Khrat was riding with his own little retinue. To either side, blocks of warriors quick-stepped to keep pace with the cavalry, crossbows slung on shoulders. The sea dragon scales on the corsairs' cloaks and banner caught the pale pre-dawn light.

A noise nagged at the edge of his hearing and he turned his head this way and that, trying to place it. Cries? No. Birdsong? Too harsh. The only thing it sounded like, it couldn't be. Miharan's assassin had seen to it. He craned around again trying to see the little witch elf, but her palanquin had fallen further behind as they rode out from the Ark. As far as he could tell she was still back in the forest that the road had just emerged from.

His cold one raised its head and grunted at the air, and he turned to grab the goad from its saddle-clip. Only then did he see what his soldiers were staring at, and understand the noise he had heard.

The war-horns on the hilltop ahead of them gave another blast, and the glittering ranks of armoured knights sent up a shout as the scarlet and silver Grail banner of the Duc unfurled over their heads. Khreos, gaping, could only clutch at his lance as a babble of orders rose behind him, cries as his

corsairs milled about into fighting ranks, as the crossbow regiments scrabbled for bolts, as his champions tried to awaken the Blood Banner to bring their cold ones to full frenzy.

And then hissing clouds of arrows flew high into the air, line after line of yeomen and Squires rounded the base of the hill and the Bretonnians were thundering down the road toward them like a floodtide.



KHREOS MALEDICT, Lord of Karond Kar, Master of the Black Ark *Exultation of Blighted Hope*, was dying. He could still feel dim fire in his crumpled leg where his cold one had fallen on it, but he had to lie on that leg because lying on his side was the only way he could drag himself along after a Bretonnian mace had crushed his other shoulder even through his armour and sea dragon cloak. His lungs felt full of splinters and when he coughed he coated the ground in front of him in a fine red spray.

He had to find Khrat. He couldn't see his nephew's black-and-cobalt surcoat anywhere in the drifts of dead dark elves that choked the road. He was sure that Khrat would never have fled like the last remnants of his army had, the triumphant Bretonnians scattering them into the forest and riding them down. He had to find Khrat, or someone that could get him to hiding and then to the Ark, get him somewhere he could heal before the last of his energy ran out or the Bretonnians came back to make sure the battlefield had no survivors.

His vision greyed out and he lay there for a time until another coughing fit ripped unconsciousness away from him. He still lay alone in the road; he was still surrounded by his dead. He was clear of the dead cold ones now: the big beasts has still been blinking stupidly as the lance-points drove at them, their nostrils only just twitching with the Blood Banner's scent. Their corpses were jammed and piled together like sacks, the bright blood of their riders mixing with the dark reptile ichor. Khreos was under no illusions that any of his guard might still be alive. For a moment

he thought he saw one of the cold one carcasses breathing, but it was just the shimmer in his vision as another wave of grey broke over him.

Reach, drag. Reach, drag. The gravel of the road was washed red under his fingers, and the dust by the roadside was a bloody slurry.

He was in among the infantry now, piled high atop one another after the knights-errant had crushed the formations as they had tried to plant their spears ready for the charge. Beyond the heaped corpses lay the second, more scattered lines of bodies where his crossbow ranks had died under Bretonnian arrows, scrambling to get their own weapons strung and loaded. The bodies thinned out towards the treeline – those were the ones who had tried to run as they realised what was happening and had been chased down. There were none of the stirrings and cries that he was used to after battles – Bretonnian fury had made the killing far too efficient for that.

Reach, drag. Reach, drag – his world had shrunk to the pain of his broken body and the sun beating on his armoured back.

He lay in between a dead corsair whose name he couldn't remember and a warrior he didn't recognise. He tried to see which regiment's badge the warrior wore, before he realised through the fog of pain that the elf wore no armour at all. The body was not lying in a death-sprawl but reclining lazily on the grass at the roadside twisting a flower-stem in his fingers. Finally he was able to focus his eyes on the red gem in its silver collar about the other elf's neck.

'I'm sorry, lord, was this not what you had planned?'

Khreos managed a single dry croak that would not become words. He could think of nothing to say.

'I would give you your map back, my lord, except that, oh, I seem to have misplaced it. Perhaps that was careless of me, but then who would have expected that a clumsy brute such as the Duc – with his castle full of sleeping babes that a single assassin could kill – would be able to read a map that showed the road by which you would be marching to his castle? Perhaps I should have memorised the land and the rendezvous position, rather than carry a map that showed me how to find my way... right... to... you.'

Khreos groaned and closed his eyes. Jahama was paring his nails with a knife.

'Oh, yes, after I'd finished dancing with them I was sure the Bretonnians would have been too stirred-up to read anything, let alone a map. But then how would I have delivered my lesson?' The assassin rolled over onto his stomach, his face next to the lord's. 'You are so fond of your lessons, my lord, always so intent on giving instruction. Haven't we done you a service, my mistress and I? Think of the lesson you will be remembered for! Imagine it! Anyone who thinks of the kind of stupid, clumsy little ruse...' Jahama had started to spit his words, and controlled himself. 'Anyone who thinks to treat myself or my brothers or the blessed Brides of Khaine as their sling-stones, their expendable pawns, will remember the lesson we have made of you.'

He sprang to his feet. 'My mistress could have refused you, you know. She discussed it with her sisters, discussed this petty noble who thought he could make her dance on his strings. But then... then you would have gone on in your tricky little ways, believing you could try to betray the Scorpion's Daughter and never be the worse for it. So why not fall in step with you, sir, dance on your strings until we could turn about and strangle you with them? I don't have your mincing subtlety and I must be blunt. It's important that you understand just why you die as you do.'

The lord's face was twisted in despair, and Jahama nodded in satisfaction.

'I'd offer to make sure, sir, that you aren't alive by the time your enemies return to the field. But I want to give you plenty of time to think about my lesson. And for my part, well, the sun is up and the Ark must sail soon, with or without you at the helm. If your nephew has survived, I'm sure he'll be happy to give the order. Excuse me, lord, I believe there's a boat waiting for me at the bay.'

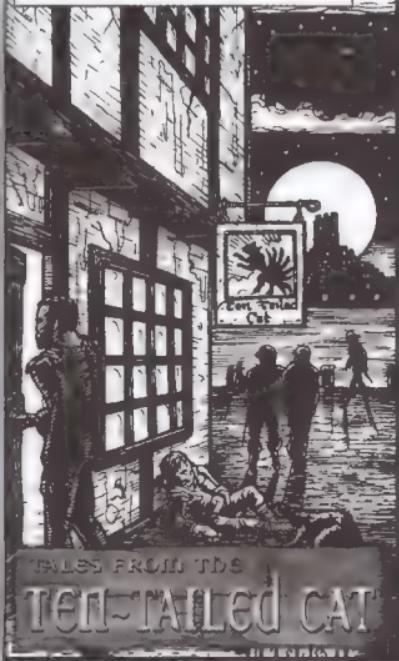
And Jahama the assassin turned away and left Khreos Maledict weeping in the dust as he disappeared into the forest, as the bright sun slanted down between the trees and the birds sang from the branches. 

The Tale of the Prophet

STORY: NIK VINCENT
ART: IAN PETERSON
LETTERS: FIONA STEPHENSON

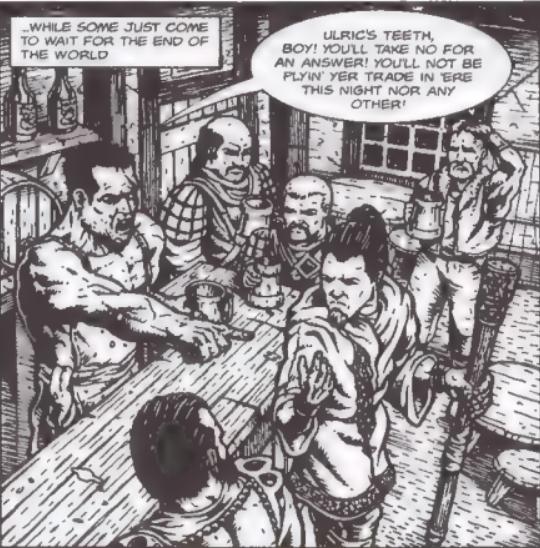
THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR RACCONTEURS AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

THEY COME TO THE TEN TAILED CAT FOR MANY REASONS, SOME TO BOAST OF THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...



...WHILE SOME JUST COME TO WAIT FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

ULRIC'S TEETH, BOY! YOU'LL TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER! YOU'LL NOT BE PLAIN' YER TRADE IN 'ERE THIS NIGHT NOR ANY OTHER!



WEREN'T YOU A LITTLE HARD ON THE BOY, A YOUNG MAN OF THE CLOTH LIKE HIM COULDN'T DO NO HARM.



NO HARM?

I'VE NOT HAD A PROPHET NOR A SEER IN MY PLACE THIS MANY A LONG SEASON, NOR WILL I EVER ALLOW ONE AGAIN...

"BUSINESS WAS BETTER THAT NIGHT THAN ANY TIME BEFORE OR SINCE, BUT STILL THE PRICE WAS TOO HIGH."

NOT SPINNIN' A FORTUNE OR TWO TONIGHT, OLD FRIEND?

I'VE SPUN THE FORTUNE OF THIS WORLD TODAY... AND IT ALL GOES FOR NOUGHT



"IT WAS MY DOIN', YE SEE. ALL HE
WANTED TO DO WAS DRINK HIMSELF
TO A STUPOR..."

THEN I'LL TELL IT,
IF YOU'LL LISTEN, SINCE THE BARMAN
PERSUADES ME SO THOROUGHLY WITH
HIS GOOD ALE..."

"BUT ONCE I'D GOT 'IM THREE
PARTS THERE I MANAGED TO
GOAD 'IM INTO TELLIN' IS PROPHECY"

"...I'LL TELL YOU
THE PROPHECY GRANTED
ME BY SIGMAR, LISTEN WELL
AND LISTEN ALL, FOR YOU'LL
NOT HEAR THIS TALE A
SECOND TIME

"...AND I HEARD
THE PEELS OF THE MIDNIGHT
BELLS - NOT ONE BELL, NOT A CITY'S
WORTH, BUT A WORLD OF BELLS
ALL CHIMING THE TURN OF
NIGHT..."

"...I SMELLED
ALL THE ODOURS AND
AROMAS OF THE WORLD
I HAD KNOWN AND OF
THE WORLD I HAD
NOT..."

"...I FELT THE
SWEET TOUCH OF EVERY
WOMAN'S EMBRACE AND THE
HARSH BLOW OF EVERY
MAN'S FIST..."

"...I LIVED A
LIFETIME IN MERE
MOMENTS..."

AND THEN...

"...NOTHING...
BLACKNESS..."

"...THE
END OF THE WORLD,
LADIES AND GENTLEMEN.
AT MIDNIGHT TONIGHT WE ALL
PERISH AND THIS WORLD
DIES

THE
END OF THE
WORLD!

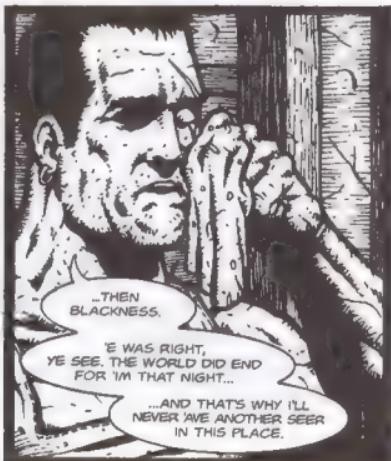
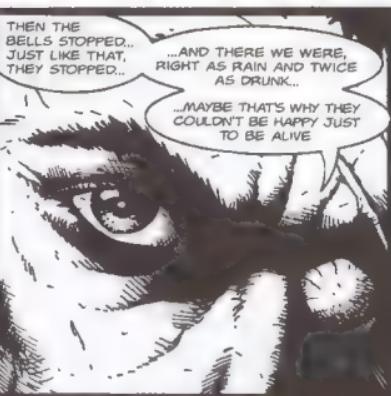
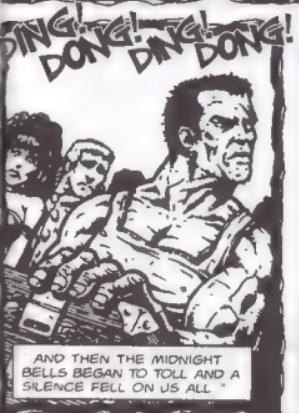
WHAT
CAN WE
DO?

BRAVO!
TELL US
ANOTHER!

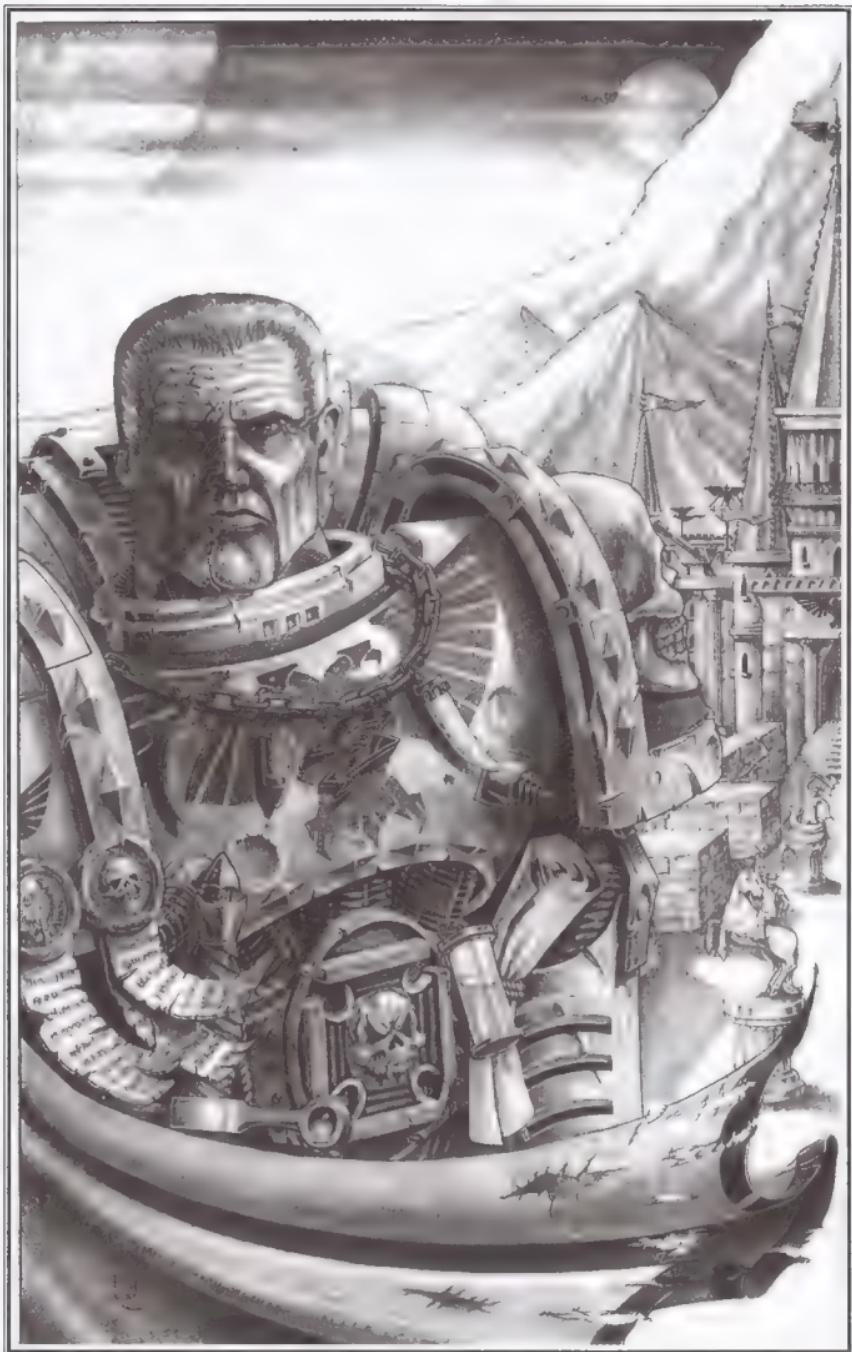
EAT, SUP
AND ENJOY THE
PARTY FOR TONIGHT
WE ALL DIE.

"AND THEY DID. THEY DRANK ME DRY
IN ONE NIGHT. A WEEK'S WORTH OF
ALE POURED IN A MATTER OF HOURS..

"...AND WHEN THE ALE WAS GONE THEY DRANK
EVERY BOTTLE OF GROG ON ME SHELVES, NO
MATTER WHERE IT'D COME FROM."



END



THE EMPEROR'S WILL

by David Charters

A LONG LINE of ships stretched away into the dark reaches of the outer system. More than sixty vessels in all, among them survey ships and recovery vessels, giant transports and tiny scouts, as well as fearsome vessels of war. Their crusade had lasted fifteen years of their time, as they had entered and re-entered the warp. But on Taran III, the homeworld of their chapter, their battle-brothers had aged nearly a hundred. The men aboard the ships were tired and the ships themselves seemed wearier still. Most had suffered damage and the warships bore the scars of many battles down their armoured sides.

Yet for all their weariness, they were still proud, and joyful at the prospect of homecoming. Aboard the giant transports were the prizes they had sought for the Emperor who commanded them – ancient artefacts from lost civilisations, treasures from a dozen strange worlds, specimens and recordings and survey results to last a thousand scholars' lifetimes.

They carried people, too – the Emperor's loyal subjects, representatives of the survivors from systems isolated in the great warp storms. Their peoples had long since given up hope that the Imperium would reach out to find its lost children – until the day the great ships of the Storm Warriors' fleet had appeared in the skies over their home-worlds.

And lastly they brought with them memories, of lost comrades, of acts of heroism, of the *Battleaxe* and the *Lionheart* and their courageous crews who would never return home, memories that would be recorded in the annals of the chapter upon their return.

But now they had been diverted. Their homecoming was to be delayed as urgent messages summoned them to undertake one final task for their Emperor before He

released them for rest and meditation beneath the silver skies of Taran III.



FROM THE viewing port of the *Sirius*, Tersa IV loomed large and forbidding. It was a giant by any standards. Much of its atmosphere was heavily polluted with thick, dark clouds obscuring the surface. Only at its northern pole, where the bitter cold had kept human settlement at bay, was there a clear view of what had once been a stark but beautiful ice planet.

Chaptermaster Calan turned from the viewing port to face the assembled officers in the wardroom.

'I understand that some among you are impatient for the assault to begin?'

It was framed as a question, but Calan's stern glare at the Marine officers made it clear that no answer was expected. He turned back to the viewing port. He could just make out the shape of the nearest vessels to the mighty battle-barge.

'Our forces are still assembling. By tonight the *Valiant* and her escorts will have joined us. Tomorrow, battle-brothers from the Black Templars will be here, and I expect a mixed force of cruisers and destroyers to arrive from Elara Prime....' He paused, his voice betraying what might have been uncertainty. 'And there may be other reinforcements as well.'

'Sir?' It was Captain Kortar, commander of the First Company, an officer whose courage verged on recklessness or even insubordination, and who typically failed to maintain the respectful silence of his brother officers in the presence of the Chaptermaster.

Calan's voice was firmer now as he spoke.

'Kortar, when the position is clearer, you will be informed. First I need to reflect further on our situation myself. We are assembling an overwhelming force around *Tesra IV*, and there can be no doubt as to our ultimate victory, nor to the fate of the rebels who have chosen to take the path of treachery. But first we must be certain that we best serve the Emperor's interests. I do not yet have that certainty. I shall retire to my quarters to meditate. Attend to your duties, gentlemen!'

Calan turned and strode from the room, his scarlet cloak sweeping behind him. The sergeant standing at the wardroom door shouted, 'Attention on deck!' and the officers leapt to their feet as their Chaptermaster left them. The sergeant followed Calan from the room and the officers relaxed. Several of them left to return to duties elsewhere aboard the *Sirius*, but most remained, confounded and intrigued by their leader's uncharacteristic caution in the face of the rebels on *Tesra IV*.

Kortar was first to speak. 'Why are we waiting? Why sit here in easy detection range of the enemy, doing nothing? We have five hundred Marines aboard the *Sirius*, a hundred more aboard *Ilyan* and *Tigris*, and enough firepower to tear a hole in their defences.'

'Perhaps, now we are so close to home, he is minded to lose as few of our brothers as possible.' The officer speaking was a young lieutenant named Marek, a promising warrior building a reputation for fighting carefully planned actions with few casualties, unlike Kortar, whose victories – impressive though they were – had often been won at great cost to the chapter. 'Intelligence suggests that the conspirators are few in number, but that the governor is among them and has persuaded the garrison that we are the enemy and that we are serving the Dark Forces. If they carry that off, then we may end up destroying loyal servants of the Emperor while the rebel scum look on and laugh.'

'What of it?' replied Kortar angrily. 'The invasion is inevitable. We are merely wasting time here.'

'You may both be right,' came a calmer, more thoughtful voice. Chaplain Dusal was standing by the viewing port. 'If we must fight, then let us do so when we have truly overwhelming force. We were nine hundred strong when we left *Taran III*. Three hundred of our battle-brothers will never see those silver skies again. Perhaps that's enough. Perhaps the Emperor honoured us with this task precisely because we have suffered and we are tired and we will not rush thoughtlessly in. The rebels aren't going anywhere. And there's always a chance that they'll surrender themselves to the Emperor's mercy when they see we mean business.'

Several others murmured in agreement and the gathering dispersed, with some officers returning to their quarters and others going to brief their men. Kortar cursed and kicked over a chair as he left to begin his daily ritual of close combat training. At least that should allow him to let off steam.



SEVERAL DECKS below, kneeling in darkness in his quarters, Calan prayed to the Emperor for guidance.



JUST BEFORE midnight, warning lights went on in the Operations Room. Klaxons blared and Calan was called to the bridge. The officers on duty might have noticed that he looked tired when he arrived, but they were too discreet to remark upon it.

'Status?' he asked as he seated himself in the captain's chair.

'The *Valiant* has been sighted, sir – approaching on vector four-zero-nine.'

Calan looked at the central viewing screen.

'Maximum magnification!'

At first she seemed like a tiny speck in the distance, then around her six other specks appeared and slowly the mighty battleship and her six escorts began to take shape. The *Valiant* had been scheduled to meet the returning Storm Warriors in the Magellan Sector, to take charge of the transports and other Imperial vessels and escort them to the bases where they would be received and their cargoes and survey records examined. Now both found themselves diverted to Tesra IV.

'Sirius to *Valiant*. This is Calan, Chaptermaster of the Emperor's Storm Warriors and commander of the battlebarge *Sirius* and its accompanying task force. Welcome. Assume position in the vanguard of the fleet. *Sirius* out.'

He watched as the enormous battleship slowly passed the *Sirius*, great scars disfiguring her armoured sides. Her escorts followed smoothly behind.

The duty officer moved to the communicator to close the comm-link to the *Valiant*, but as he did so he paused and looked closely at a monitor. 'Sir - we have another contact coming from the same bearing as the *Valiant*. A small craft, could be an Imperial shuttle. Scanning now.'

At last, thought Calan, now I shall have clarity.

'Sir - the shuttle is hailing us. He doesn't appear to have visual, but I'm putting him on loudspeaker.'

Calan sat back in his command chair and waited while the hiss of static faded and he could make out the words coming from the loudspeaker.

'This is Imperial shuttle *Aurora*, hailing Imperial task force. We request permission to dock with your flagship. We have one passenger aboard. Code Indigo.'

Code Indigo, thought Calan, ignoring the startled faces on the bridge, an Inquisitor. Now things truly will become clearer. He looked towards the duty officer. 'Signal them to come aboard. I will receive our visitor in my quarters.' He stood and had turned to leave the bridge when behind him a voice shouted, 'They've fired something! The shuttle's fired something!' A klaxon sounded and warning lights started flashing.

'Identify that missile!' shouted Calan. 'Who are they firing at?'

The duty officer was leaning over the shoulder of a young crewman at another monitor. 'Sir - it's not a missile at all. It appears to be a drop pod. We detect one life form aboard. It's heading for the planet's surface, moving very fast.' He turned and looked at Calan. 'Sir - they've got fighters down there, and a lot of firepower. Whoever he is, I don't give much for his chances.'

Neither do I, thought Calan, whoever he is, he must be very brave or very stupid.

'Sir - *Ilyan*'s hailing us. Captain Sovak requests permission to talk to you.'

'Put him on.'

This time there was visual, and Calan looked into the steely blue eyes of the officer commanding the strike cruiser, a man who might one day succeed him as Chaptermaster.

'Sir - you will have seen that the shuttle has launched a drop pod towards Tesra IV. I don't know if he's friend or foe - he could be trying to reach the rebels to assist them, or he may be on the Emperor's business. Do you want me to blow him out of the sky, or clear a path for him through the enemy defences?'

Once again Calan understood why he felt such confidence for the future of the Chapter. With such men - clear thinking, bold, decisive - the Emperor's foes had good reason to fear. Calan closed his eyes for a second to think. Help him, serve the Emperor and let the Emperor's will be done. Calan started. It was as if someone was talking inside his head. 'Help him! Clear his path! Ensure that he reaches the planet at all costs. Other vessels stand aside. *Ilyan* and *Tigris*, you have weapons free - fire at will. May the Emperor's will be done!'



HUNDREDS OF MILES below the task force, swarms of fighters were emerging on the edge of the atmosphere, racing to intercept the drop pod. As they approached the tiny pod it seemed to accelerate and started to dodge

and weave. The fighters closed in, mirroring its movements and firing lance-like bursts of laser cannon at it. The fate of the tiny craft looked inevitable, until suddenly an enormous laser bolt from the *Ilyan* ripped through the fighter formation, incinerating many of them, and the strike cruiser and her sister vessel surged forward into their midst. Several of the fighters were too slow to dodge the oncoming cruisers and were smashed in fiery explosions by the accurate fire as the ships raced towards the outer atmosphere of the planet, covering the descent of the tiny drop pod.

On the bridge of the *Sirius*, Calan shook his head in wonder as his cruiser captains threw their ships around space like fighter jets. 'They're following the pod right down into the atmosphere!' shouted one of the crewmen on the bridge.

They watched in awe as the cruisers descended behind the tiny drop pod. Every weapon on the cruisers seemed to be firing, blasting at the rebel fighters like giants troubled by gnats. As they entered the atmosphere their hulls glowed and seemed to be ablaze, and the fighters peeled off as their heat shields threatened to overload. The pod itself only accelerated further, glowing like a shooting star and then turning off rapidly towards the frozen north and disappearing to land somewhere in the arctic wastes. *Ilyan* and *Tigris* turned off in the opposite direction, racing through the skies of the polluted planet, leaving multiple sonic booms and hurricane-like tail winds in their wake.

'Unsubtle, I think you'll agree, but effective. If the rebels were in any doubt about our presence here before, they're certainly under no illusions now.'

Calan span at the unfamiliar voice.

'Forgive me, Chaptermaster. My shuttle docked while you were otherwise distracted. I am Inquisitor Andrijssen. I am here by order of the Inquisition to assist and advise you in this grave matter. With your permission, I would welcome the opportunity to talk further with you about the situation on Tesra IV.'

Calan looked at the tall, stooped figure swathed in a dark cloak, his face and head concealed by a hood. 'Of course, my lord

Inquisitor. It is an honour to welcome you aboard the *Sirius*. Shall we retire to my quarters?'



THE FLEET HAD been in orbit around Tesra IV for eleven days. A company of Black Templars arrived on the second day and further reinforcements continued to assemble. The captain commanding the Templars made clear his frustration at the delay. His men were renowned for their close combat skills and their great physical strength, even by the standards of the Adeptus Astartes, and they wanted to fight. By contrast he found the Storm Warriors' chaptermaster a strange character, his destiny lying in the far reaches of deep space far from the planet he calls home, braving the warp with its dangers and its unpredictability on his chapter's great crusades. Their commander seemed to have a different perspective on the timing of human affairs, returning home after a century-long crusade, but the Templar longed for the simple, straightforward virtue of a short, sharp fight. The motto of the Black Templars was *No pity! No remorse! No fear!*, and he yearned to swing the thunder-hammer of his forces and bring forth righteous redemption upon the traitors down below.

Aboard the *Sirius* even the normally calm Chaplain Dusal was heard to mutter about time wasting. Kortar was beside himself. He had put three of the chapter's close combat instructors in the sick bay as he worked out his frustrations in the training chamber. From the *Valiant* came courteous but increasingly impatient enquiries as to Calan's intentions. Lord Admiral Dacius, commanding the *Valiant*, was technically in command of the fleet in space, but was required to defer to Calan in respect of the planetary assault. His own officers had even suggested that the *Valiant* launch its own assault, bombarding the planet and then landing invasion parties selected from their own highly-trained boarding crews. Dacius had quashed the

idea, standing firm against the unrest amongst his officers but still he could not hide his own frustration.

Finally on the tenth day the captains of *Ilyan* and *Tigris* had defied convention and joined with several of the escort commanders and the Black Templars' captain in coming aboard for 'consultations' with Calan. Calan listened to their requests for clarification and then sent them away, retiring to his quarters to meditate and pray with the mysterious Inquisitor.



FAR BELOW ON the planet's surface, the winds howled around the Winter Palace of His Most Glorious Excellency Ignatius the Third, governor of Tesra IV by Imperial command. The Winter Palace was Ignatius's favourite retreat, a haven of tranquillity on an over-developed industrial planet, much of which had slowly turned into a single giant city. He had once heard it called a hive-world, and that was increasingly what it was, with its forty billion inhabitants, its vast underground factories and dormitories, and the mining operations that penetrated almost to the planet's core.

It was a world of enormous wealth, yet it was also a desolate place whose atmosphere had been poisoned by industrial pollution. Only in the arctic north could a man walk freely on the planet's surface and breathe the air without the help of apparatus. Few people ventured there however because of the ferocious arctic climate with its bitter winds, icy temperatures and sudden storms. It was about as brutal a place as a man could imagine, thought Ignatius as he walked from his well-heated private chambers towards the gate that led outside to the spectacular ice gardens with their centuries old frozen sculptures. Whenever he stayed at the Winter Palace he spent fifteen or twenty minutes at the start of each day in the ice gardens. He enjoyed the sense of privacy and seclusion in them and liked to look up at the mighty Mount

Okram, the tallest mountain on the planet, in whose shadow the Winter Palace had been built a thousand years before.

Mount Okram occupied a special place in the consciousness of all native-born Tesrans. In primitive times young men had attempted to climb it for the honour of their peoples and as a test of manhood. The lucky ones turned back while they could. There was no known account of an unaided climber reaching the summit and returning alive. In more recent times attempts had been made to land on the summit from the air, but even large craft could not manoeuvre safely in the storms that constantly swept the summit. Teleport tests had been tried with volunteers, but the metallic ores at the heart of the mountain upset the delicate positioning apparatus with catastrophic – and fatal – consequences. The result of all this was that Mount Okram remained unconquered, nature's last bastion in a world devastated by mankind. Ignatius found it fitting that the mountain should provide the backdrop to the palace. He was surrounded on three sides by the walls and fortifications of the palace grounds with their heavy weapons emplacements and reinforced bunkers, while to his rear an impregnable force of nature protected him.

Today Ignatius had a concern of a different type. He had received a message from the Imperial task force circling the planet. He was to receive a visit from the Chaptermaster of the Storm Warriors, no less, to 'conduct enquiries on behalf of the Emperor'. He was surprised that the Imperial forces were taking such a delicate approach. By this time he would have expected them to have charged in with a full-scale planetary assault, which would have suited him perfectly. Then they would have discovered – to their cost – that the armouries of Tesra IV that had equipped the Imperial Navy so magnificently over the centuries could also produce land-based weapons. Ignatius had personally overseen the secret installation of concealed batteries of nova cannons, missile silos and other defences. When the Imperium attacked they would be blasted to atoms. With the Emperor's forces destroyed, he, Ignatius the Third, would

control not just Tesra IV, but the entire Sector. It was risky, of course, but he had friends that even his closest accomplices knew nothing about. His periods of unexplained absence over the past three years had in fact been well spent securing new allies, allies who understood and appreciated him, who would support him and his rule, powerful, ruthless allies who would make the Imperium think twice before attempting to re-take this Sector.

As he thought of his powerful friends, he reached inside his robe and gently rubbed the dark, ornate medallion that hung around his neck. Even to wear such an object was punishable by death, but it amused Ignatius to feel it around his neck at meetings of the planetary council. Soon there would be no planetary council – he looked forward to personally ending the lives of some of its more troublesome members in the most barbaric fashion. But first he needed a victory, a decisive victory over the Imperial fleet circling overhead to show them all that they could not resist his power.

He had been tempted to fire the nova cannons almost two weeks ago when a bizarre incident had occurred. A drop pod was launched from the Imperial fleet, his fighters moved to intercept it, and two strike cruisers intervened, chasing away his fighters and risking their own destruction by entering the planet's atmosphere. His advisors still had not determined if they were pursuing or protecting the drop pod, since the pod had veered off and crashed on the other side of Mount Okram. His forces had found it burnt beyond recognition in the arctic wastes. Whatever its secrets might have been, they had gone to the grave with its unknown pilot.

Ignatius opened the door to the ice garden. A bitter gust of wind blew in a flurry of snow. He shivered. It was an unusually cold day. Or perhaps he was uncharacteristically nervous. Today he would meet a Chaptermaster for the first time. It should be entertaining, he thought to himself, looking up at the mountain towering above him. I've never killed a Marine before.

HIGH UP ON the mountainside, overlooking the Winter Palace far below, part of the rock face appeared to move and take on human form. Slowly a figure became apparent, gliding smoothly across the rocks in a snake-like movement, and barely visible beneath a camouflage cloak. The icy wind howled across the slope, blowing flurries of snow and ice before it. The slowly moving figure was the only living thing in sight. Everywhere was desolation and bitter, icy cold. The figure stopped at a gentle rise in the slope and moved into position behind it. It had been a long trek from the carefully incinerated drop pod, and an even tougher ascent. Now he would have to wait, possibly for many days, and it would be brutally uncomfortable. But the waiting figure was capable of great patience and had endurance beyond the capacity of normal men. If he had to wait, then wait he would, for he was in the service of the Emperor and he would do his duty.



ARE YOU SURE you want to do this alone?" Chaplain Dusal looked at Calan as he walked slowly across the main deck of the *Sirius*'s dock towards his shuttle, struggling to contain his objections.

Calan paused. "You know that there is no other way. It is the Emperor's will."

"It's also very foolhardy. He may kill you out of hand."

"No. An older, wiser servant of the Emperor than I once said, 'Know your enemy'. Ignatius is a vain, conceited man. He will want to toy with his prey."

Dusal nodded towards the Inquisitor who had followed them to the dock, but now stood apart from them, shrouded in his dark cloak, his face hidden beneath his hood.

"You're taking a lot on trust. I'd feel happier if you'd at least allow us to teleport some Terminators in behind you. Kortar would kill to lead them."

Calan laughed. "I believe he would. But my decision is made."

Dusal smiled and shrugged. 'I've served you long enough to know that no purpose is served by arguing with you. Very well – good luck!' Calan held out his hand. The chaplain clasped it firmly, wondering if it was the last time.

Calan turned and entered the shuttle, the hydraulics whined as the hatch shut behind him and then the engines roared powerfully as they ignited. Dusal stepped back. 'May the faith of the Emperor and his strong right arm guard you and guide you.' He turned and headed back to the bridge.



THE ROARING sound of powerful thrusters interrupted the moaning of the wind around the Winter Palace. Ignatius looked up from his desk and stared out through the sixteen inch armoured glass window at the landing pad. An Imperial shuttle was landing in the grounds, painted in the distinctive scarlet and gold livery of the Storm Warriors.

A strange chapter, thought Ignatius, and one for which my friends have a particular loathing. They will be pleased with me for this. He turned to his aide standing beside the head of his personal bodyguard, an ogryn accustomed to killing on command for his master. 'Our guest has arrived. I trust that all the arrangements are in place to take care of him?' It was the third time that morning that he had asked the question. Both men knew that Ignatius's attempt at grim humour concealed his fraying nerves.

'Yes, master, we are ready to take care of him as soon as you give the signal.'

'Good, then we had better meet him. Is he alone?'

'Just the pilot, master. He won't be a problem.'

'Very well, let us receive him in the ice garden.'



THE TALL, POWERFUL figure of the Chaptermaster walked slowly amongst the giant ice sculptures, his scarlet cloak flapping around his ancient ceremonial armour. Unusually for someone of his calling, he appeared to be unarmed, save for an ornate ceremonial dagger at his waist. He paused from time to time to gaze appreciatively at some particularly fine work.

'Greetings, my honoured guest!' cried Ignatius as he approached, followed by his retinue of servants and bodyguards.

'Greetings, governor. It seems you are a fortunate man, blessed with many fine things.'

Ignatius bowed, 'It is the Emperor's will. All good things flow from Him. To what do we owe the unexpected honour of your visit?'

'To the Emperor's work. Reports have reached us, troubling reports my lord, of treachery planned but not yet executed, of petty gods secretly worshipped by those who feign loyalty to the Imperium. That is what brings me to Tesra IV!'

'By my honour, I swear that I will do my utmost to rid this planet of any who plan treachery against the Emperor!' Ignatius was red in the face, sweating slightly despite the cold. But he took comfort from his surroundings, from the visible trappings of power around him, his bodyguards, the Palace's defences, and the towering presence of Mount Okram in the background.

To Ignatius, Calan seemed typical of the brutish force that constituted the Adeptus Astartes. He had cropped grey hair and a granite face with piercing grey eyes. One half of his face was hideously scarred. His very calmness exuded menace and Ignatius' servants stepped back while his guards nervously fingered their weapons.

'Oh, but you will, governor, you most certainly will do your utmost. I have here a list of those who are guilty of these crimes – a list that includes many of your closest friends and associates, your own family, and of course at the head of the list yourself, Ignatius the Third, governor by Imperial command.' Calan held out a small scroll that bore the seal of the Inquisition. 'You will order the arrest of all those on the

list, and ensure that they receive the full force and benefit of the Emperor's justice. You will do this immediately. And then, my lord governor, you will continue to rule Tersa IV in the Emperor's name – except that this time you'll mean it. In future you will truly be the most diligent and loyal of the Emperor's servants.'

Ignatius gasped as he took the list and stepped back out of reach to break the seal and scrutinise it. To his astonishment, he saw dozens of names listed, along with the posts held by the plotters. Most astonishingly of all, Ignatius's own name was at the top. This was extraordinary – his entire plot had become known. For a moment he almost panicked. And then he focussed once more on the solitary figure before him. This arrogant brute stood before him now, alone and unsupported, challenging him without benefit of weapons or allies.

Ignatius stepped forward. 'How dare you challenge me?' he roared. 'In your arrogance you have come to my world, to my palace, where I rule! You will never leave here alive. Beg me now for mercy and I may grant you a quick death.'

Calan stepped forward and stood close to Ignatius so that their breath mingled in the cold air. He looked mournfully into the governor's eyes, the edge of hardness tempered by what seemed to be a profound sorrow and weariness.

'You disappoint me, governor, but you do not surprise me.' He turned and stared towards the summit of Mount Okram, looking for something that could not be seen with the naked eye.



MANY THOUSANDS of feet above the men in the ice garden, the assassin crouched unmoving, oblivious to the cold, staring through the sniper-scope at the scene below, awaiting the signal from the Chaptermaster. When it came he spoke aloud for the first time, though only the wind and the snow could hear, 'Divine Emperor, Protector and Benefactor of mankind, guide this Thy weapon on its

path of righteousness!' When he squeezed the trigger there was an almost inaudible *phuuut* and then he relaxed, no longer conscious of the scene below him, and started thinking about the long climb back down the mountain.

It had been a challenge, but it was not the greatest that he had faced in the Emperor's service, nor would it be the last. Like all members of the Officio Assassinorum he knew that one day he would face a situation for which his skill would be insufficient, where the odds were too great and his luck would finally run out.

But not today, he thought as he started to disassemble the rifle.



IGNATIUS FELT something sting his neck, and touched it gingerly as if expecting an insect bite – except that there were no insects at the Winter Palace. His hand came away with a smear of blood on it. He looked up at the mountainside, visibly shocked, his hands and knees starting to tremble.

'What...what have you done to me?'

'The Emperor's will, governor. The Emperor's servants are everywhere. There can be no escape, no hiding from his divine retribution. Your days of treachery are over. Running in your veins is a poison. It was made according to a formula so ancient that its origins are no longer recorded. It is untraceable and incurable. It will kill you, slowly and painfully, in less than twenty-four hours...'

Ignatius gasped and staggered as if about to faint.

'Unless you take this.' Calan held out a small glass phial containing a clear liquid. 'This is not a cure, it merely delays, by twenty-four hours, what would otherwise be an agonising death. You will not be able to replicate it. Its secrets are known only to the Officio Assassinorum. But as a loyal servant of the Emperor you will be sent regular supplies. Because you are His loyal servant, aren't you, Ignatius?'

Calan's eyes were suddenly empty, devoid of feeling or compassion. Ignatius felt as if he was staring at Death itself.

'Treachery!' he screamed. At this, with a screaming whine of overloaded hydraulics and the thumping and crashing of heavy metal feet, a dozen Sentinels rose from behind the furthest line of sculptures and smashed through the ancient artwork to form a circle around the Chaptermaster. Ignatius' retinue scattered, save for his bodyguards, who dropped to their knees with sidearms in the firing position.

Calan looked around calmly, taking in the weapons trained on him from the Sentinels and the nervous, frightened eyes of the rebels manning them. 'It is time, governor, for you to make a decision.' His voice was icy calm, at the same time menacing and yet offering the prospect of reassurance, of salvation. 'It will not be the most difficult decision that you take in the coming weeks, but it is the most important.'

Ignatius could already feel that something was happening inside him. He was starting to sweat profusely, his hands were shaking and he found it hard to gather his thoughts. His mouth was dry and he started to sway. Deep inside he felt only darkness, anguish and utter despair. He looked around at the guards manning the Sentinels. They were waiting for the order to fire. His bodyguards were waiting too, their weapons trained on the unprotected head of the Chaptermaster. He thought of his allies in their hidden chambers deep beneath the planet's surface, waiting for his signal to strike. And he realised that all of it was useless. He was doomed and he had no choice. Tears filled his eyes and he choked back a sob.

'Of course, my lord,' he wailed. 'The Emperor's loyal servant will do his bidding at all times!' His legs shook and tears ran down his face as he fell to his knees.

'Come, come, Ignatius, let us not forget our dignity,' soothed Calan. 'You are governor by Imperial command. You should not show such emotion in public. There is much work to be done - there are arrests to be ordered, there is treachery to be punished, terminations and interrogations to be carried out. Shall we

start with one or two members of your own family, perhaps as a way of demonstrating the strength of your devotion to the Emperor?'

'Yes, my lord,' wailed the broken, defeated man. 'By the Emperor's command, His will shall be done!'



IN THE BRIDGE of the *Sirius*, the duty officer called down to Calan's quarters. 'Sir, something extraordinary is happening on Tesra IV.'

When he entered the bridge, Calan stared in wonder at the giant viewing screen. At more than a dozen points on the planet's surface, huge explosions were erupting, sending flames tens of thousands of feet into the atmosphere.

'Sensors indicate nova cannons, sir. They must have been concealed on the planet's surface. They started detonating about ten minutes ago. It looks as if they're destroying their own defences.'

'Sir!' A crewman called over to Calan. 'Sir - planetary defence forces are airborne. I'm detecting nearly a thousand short-range orbital launches. Probably fighters but could include some bombers and assault craft. It looks like they're launching everything they've got, and they're heading this way.'

Calan relaxed into the command chair and allowed himself a gentle smile. 'Advise the fleet to go to action stations, but do not fire except at my command.'

'Sir - they're hailing us. The Tesran pilots are hailing us.'

The bridge crew were staring at Calan, as puzzled by his relaxed demeanour now as at any time since the shuttle had returned him safely to the *Sirius* just eight hours ago.

'Put it on the loudspeaker.'

The words as they came through were crackly at first, but the meaning soon became clear.

'...welcome Imperial forces...invite you to land on Tesra IV... escort you safely to landing zones...'

Word quickly spread through the ship. For a moment Calan was puzzled as he tried to identify a strange roaring sound, like the noise of some great machine – and then he realised it was the sound of thousands of cheering voices echoing around the corridors, as Space Marines and crewmen gathered at monitors and viewing ports to watch the spectacle unfolding around them.

The bridge door opened and Kortar came storming in.

'Don't say they're surrendering! The filthy yellow scum! We should request powers of exterminatus to cleanse this filth.'

'No, Kortar.' Calan looked at the angry younger man. 'They are not surrendering. We are their allies and they are welcoming us as allies should. The evil on this planet has already been cleansed, by subtler, more precise methods than you and I are accustomed to. The Emperor's will has been done, and we shall all live to celebrate our homecoming.'

Kortar stared at Calan, for once lost for words, his face looking fit to burst. And then he too laughed out loud and let out a great whoop of joy. The crusade was finally over, and the Emperor's will had indeed been done. From the decks of the *Sirius* thousands of voices broke into song, as marines and chapter-serfs, naval crewmen and Imperial officers sang the chapter's anthem, 'We Praise Thee, Imperator', and the thoughts of the Marines and their chapter-serfs turned again to homecoming and the silver skies of Taran III.

'Sir – we have messages of congratulations coming in from *Ilyan* and *Tigris* and from the Black Templars. And Lord Admiral Dacius wishes to speak to you.'

'Put him on,' ordered Calan, feeling suddenly weary with the exertions of the past few days.

The images of the planet's surface disappeared from the main viewing screen and were replaced by the impeccable admiral, seated in his finest Imperial Navy drill uniform on the bridge of the *Valiant*.

'My Lord Calan, for five hundred years the *Valiant* has fought the foes of the Imperium, and twenty-seven admirals

raised their flags aboard her before I was granted that great honour. But I would happily wager that none has seen a finer day than this. I have fought alongside many fine comrades from the Astartes, and together we have conquered and crushed the foes of the Imperium, often at great cost. But never have I found myself saying that it was a privilege not to fight alongside a brave comrade. Please accept my congratulations, my compliments and my gratitude. With your permission, my lord, the Imperial Navy will take control of the situation on Tesra IV, leaving you free to resume your journey.'

Calan sighed. 'The privilege was mine, Lord Admiral, and I happily release Tesra IV to your command.'

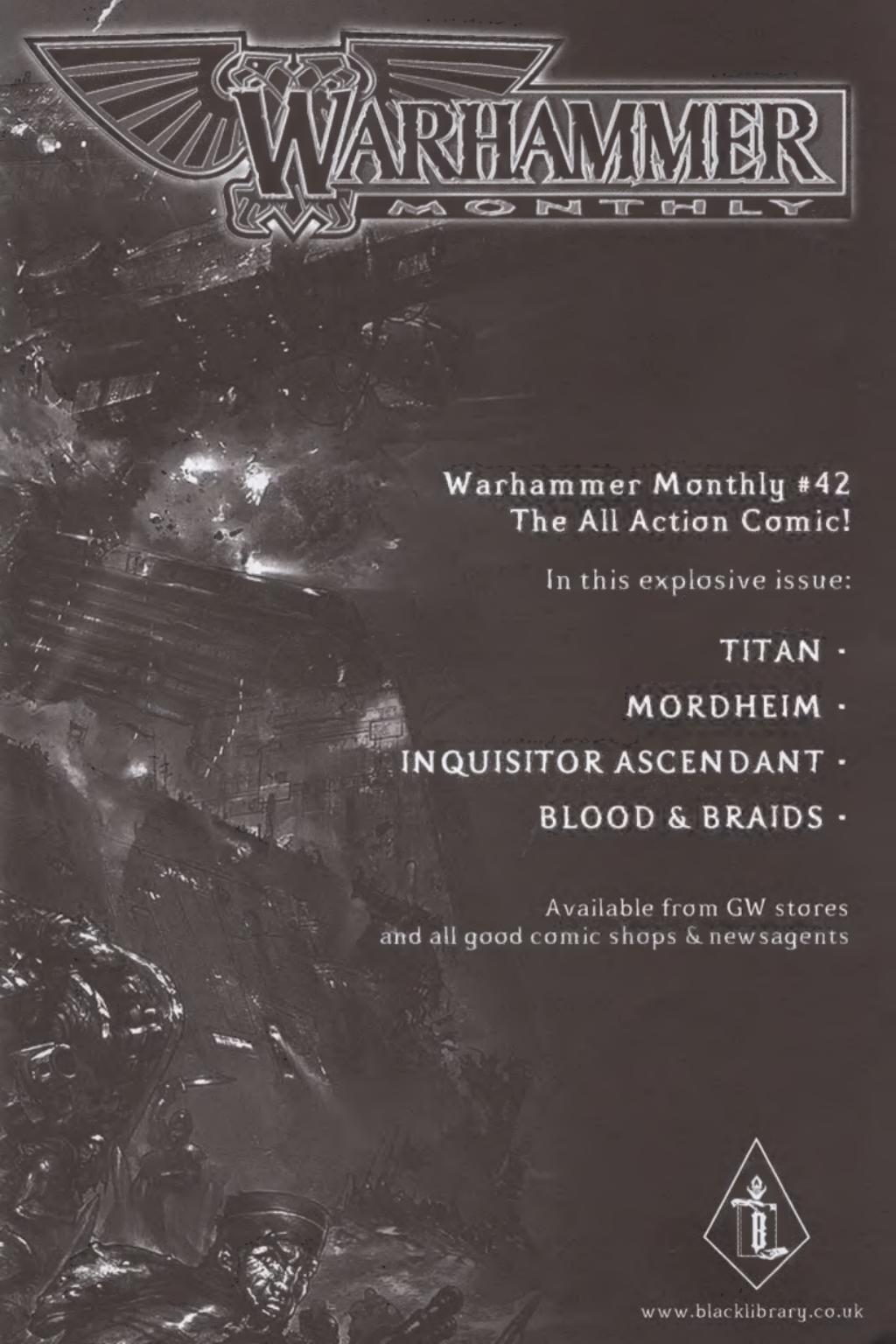
The image on the screen faded and Calan turned to Kortar. 'Kortar!' he snapped, making the burly captain leap to attention. 'Sir!' he bellowed, standing rigidly at his formidable best.

'Kortar,' said Calan more softly, 'We're going home. Signal farewell and Emperor's speed to the Imperial vessels that accompanied us and order all chapter vessels to form line astern, *Ilyan* and *Tigris* to bring up the rear.'

'Yes, sir!' shouted Kortar, eagerly rushing to the comm-set. He looked up happily as the signals went out, and was puzzled to see Calan slumped exhausted in his chair. In his mind's eye Kortar was already home beneath the silver skies and was rushing headlong into the warm, golden waters that lapped against the shore of the Great Ocean.

But Calan was elsewhere, somewhere out in the warp, remembering lost comrades, recalling the glorious sacrifice of the *Lionheart* and the *Battleaxe*, and reflecting on the tasks yet to come, as the chapter healed its wounds and prepared itself once again to journey out into the warp on its next crusade.

But we'll be wiser now, thought Kortar, you've taught us wisdom and patience, and that we must not let our strength blind us to the needs of true victory. Next time we shall be more formidable than ever before. This will be your gift to the chapter, my Lord Calan. *May the Emperor's will be done!* ♣



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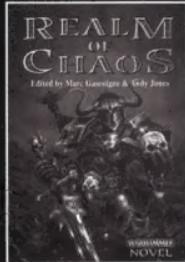
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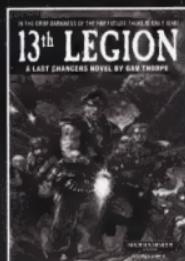


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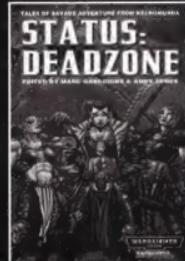
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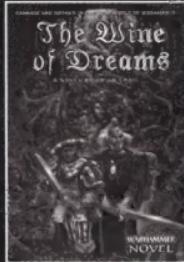
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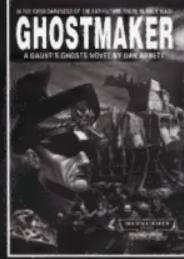
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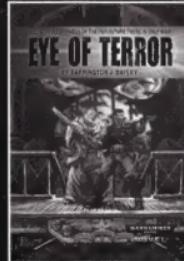
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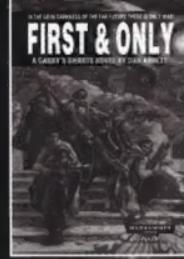
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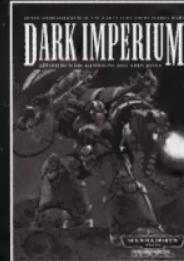
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The Jackboys with the shotguns were moving. Chambering shells, they aimed and fired. Snowdog dropped, hitting the deck hard and rolling, firing off an entire clip of wild shots. Tigerlily leapt towards the second Jackboy and rammed her elbow into his throat. She spun low and hammered a slender bladed dagger into his belly, slicing upwards in one fluid motion. The Jackboy gurgled and fell to the factory floor, dropping his shotgun and grasping his crushed larynx.

• **RAPTOR DOWN** by Gav Thorpe

'Fly sweet vengeance!' Berhardt spat, pressing down on the firing stud. A half-second later the missile streaked downwards and then levelled, disappearing into the dust on a trail of white fire. Jaeger felt his heart beat once, then again, then there was a bright patch in the storm and a moment later a muffled boom shook the canopy.

'Fuel carrier, I think,' Berhardt commented, not looking up from the sighting array.

• **JAHAMA'S LESSON** by Matthew Farrer

Jahama placed his hands on the staggering knight's shoulders as though he were about to deliver a double-cheek Bretonnian kiss of comradeship, then he spun the man about, pushed off and drove both his feet into the face of the first of the squires to come running through the far door. The boy went down unconscious or dead and Jahama turned the movement into a backward roll, swiped a knife through the hamstrings of the second squire and ran through into the great hall.

• **TALES FROM THE TEN-TAILED CAT** by Nik Vincent & Ian Peterson

THE TALE OF THE PROPHET

'The end of the world, ladies and gentlemen. At midnight tonight we all perish and this world dies.'

• **THE EMPEROR'S WILL** by David Charters

Suddenly an enormous laser bolt from the Ilyan ripped through the fighter formation, incinerating many of them, and the strike cruiser and her sister vessel surged forward into their midst. Several of the fighters were too slow to dodge the oncoming cruisers and were smashed in fiery explosions by the accurate fire as the ships raced towards the outer atmosphere of the planet, covering the descent of the tiny drop pod.

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